

together, you and i (could teach love a thing or two) by FateChica

Series: together, you and i, the extended edition [1]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-05-16

Updated: 2018-11-05

Packaged: 2022-04-23 02:55:48

Rating: Mature

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 10

Words: 250,304

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

When El Hopper, former principal dancer for the American Ballet Theatre and new holder of a bachelor's degree in developmental psychology, gets a job at St. Ignatius Preparatory School in Chicago as the dance teacher and guidance counselor, she's excited to marry her two passions: dancing and helping kids.

She doesn't expect to develop a crush on Mike Wheeler, the cute Physics/Chemistry teacher.

Mike, for his part, is just trying not to embarrass himself in front of the pretty dance teacher and finds that that's a much taller order than he could have ever anticipated.

But, when El and Mike are assigned to be the faculty supervisors for this year's Winter Ball, they find themselves getting closer in ways they never expected...

1. Welcome to St. Ignatius

Author's Note:

Whee, welcome to my new fic! This is going to be a lot shorter than "love song", but, really, almost everything is. I've had a lot of fun plotting this out, so I hope you enjoy!

Quick shoutout to both EvieSmallwood and Fourth Horse for giving this a look over and letting me bounce ideas off of both of them. I don't know what I'd do without either of you. LOVE YOU, BOOS.

"Hey Mr. Wheeler, Ms. Hopper's pretty cool, don't you think?"

The question, such as it is, barely registers in Mike's brain. Half of his attention is focused on the lab table right in front of him as he tests the equipment for his upcoming 4th block Honors Physics lab. He's got a box of "frictionless" cars (which are essentially just titanium blocks with low-friction wheels bolted on the four corners) and he's rolling one at a time down a shallow wooden ramp, just to make sure each car is still in good enough working order for the lab. The last thing he wants is cars with wheels that are too wobbly or too gunked up because *scientific integrity*.

Mike's a little behind in preparing for his lab, so he's feeling a little frantic. He usually spends the majority of his lunch break doing the set-up, but he got cornered in the teacher's lounge by the Bible Studies teacher, Mr. Jenkins, who spent 20 minutes complaining about his class of sophomores that always somehow manages to get him off track and how it's already the end of the first month of school and he's already two weeks behind on the syllabus.

Maybe if you didn't let them distract you with crazy weirdo questions, you wouldn't get so off track, Mike thought, but didn't say as he eagerly looked for an exit. And, by the time Mike managed to fend Mr. Jenkins off, lunch was half over and Mike still had all of his prep work left to do and only 20 minutes in which to do it.

So, that's what one half of his brain is occupied with.

A good portion of the other half of his brain is panicking over the cryptic text message he got from his editor only a couple of hours ago, one that simply read "CALL ME ASAP" with no details or preamble or *anything*. Of course, Mike can't call during school hours, so all he can do is agonize and worry. Both his editor and his agent have been on his ass over the past couple of months to get them the next 5 chapters of his next book, like they're worried Mike's *never* going to finish them.

Gee, you'd never know I'd already published two very successful books or anything, from how they're acting. Mike understands their worry, he really does. But being hounded by both his agent *and* his editor for new chapters is a surefire way to kill any and all creativity and motivation Mike has for the world and characters he's created. And that cryptic text message? *Not Helping.*

Not much of a surprise, then, given how his brain's occupied, that Mike doesn't really *hear* the question one of his students asks. Sure, he hears the words, but they mostly go in one ear and out the other without much in the way of comprehension.

Still, Mike looks up at the sound of his name and focuses the best he can on the student who spoke – a senior named Melanie. She's sitting primly at her assigned spot, uniform immaculate, not a hair out of place. She's one of the brighter girls in Mike's Honor Physics class, always eager with questions and sharp on the uptake. But she's looking at him with a mischievous smile that is, well, *unusual*, to say the least.

"What was that, Melanie?"

"Ms. Hopper, you know, the new dance teacher and guidance counselor? We" – Melanie gestures to the others two girls, Paula and Caroline, who are standing at the lab table she's sitting at – "were just talking about how cool she is and we were wondering if you thought so, too."

Mike eyes the trio of girls and tries not to let the hackles raise on the back of his neck beneath the collar of his button-down shirt. The

three of them are, from what Mike knows, rather popular – pretty, smart, involved in student government and in various clubs – definitely the type of girls that never gave guys like him the time of day back when he was in high school (to be fair, though, he avoided girls like that like the plague, so it was a mutual shunning).

Still, these three are pretty tame, as far as he knows. They don't go out of their way to bully or make fun of other students. They're just pretty and popular and overly concerned about their GPAs and class standings. So, why are they asking him about St. Ignatius Prep's newest faculty member?

Mike's eyebrows raise as he responds. "Why are you asking me? It's not like my opinion's going to change yours."

At this, Caroline rolls her eyes. "C'mon, Mr. Wheeler. Surely, you have an opinion."

"Yeah, Mr. Wheeler," Paula chimes in.

Mike knows he's looking at them with confusion while, one at a time, other students start funneling in to his classroom, fresh from lunch. And, yet, he can't help but think about his newest colleague and realizing, with a mild cringe, that he barely knows her, he's been so wrapped up in his own stuff.

Mike's only met El Hopper a few times – one of those times being at the first staff meeting the week before school started where he'd barely been paying attention because, again, his editor was bugging him, and another one of those times was when they literally ran into each other on their way to their respective destinations, both of them yelling out quick apologies before rushing off, Mike back to his classroom, El to...wherever she was off to.

Mike's seen her a couple of times in the teacher's lounge, but he knows El spends most of her time in her office, including during lunch, her door open for any student to walk in whenever they want or need to. He's heard from some of his fellow teachers that the students love going to her office because, one, she always goes out of her way to give the students her time and, two, she has a bowl of candy on her desk that anyone's free to grab from. He doesn't know

much about her, otherwise – he knows she was a dancer of some kind back in New York or LA or somewhere like that, and that she honestly seems to care about the happiness and well-being of the students, and that she's pretty (*really pretty*) in a way that scares him if he thinks about it too hard.

But, none of that makes it into his answer when he says, “Yeah, she’s pretty cool, I guess. I don’t really know her very well.”

Melanie huffs out a sigh. “Come on, Mr. Wheeler, you can do better than *that*. She’s awesome! She has all these pictures in her dance studio of all the places she’s been and she’s nice and funny and *so* beautiful.”

Mike can’t help but grin. “Well, it sounds like *you* have an opinion, Melanie. And, for insulting *my* opinion, you just volunteered to be my lab assistant for the day. Congratulations.” Mike likes to assign one of his students to be his lab assistant each time they have lab, usually as a mild punishment for something or just because he likes the way they groan at the unfairness of it all.

And Melanie’s reaction doesn’t disappoint. She pouts and lets out a whine that tails into a groan and everyone else lets out a series of low oohs and laughs. “Aww, c’mon, Mr. Wheeler. I was just *kidding*.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mike says, gesturing for her to come up to the front of the class with a wave of his hand. “Come on, lab assistant, up you get.” Melanie reluctantly shuffles her way up to the front of the class, her friends’ giggles following behind her. For a few minutes as class gets ready to start, Mike lets himself get lost in finishing his lab set up with an extra pair of hands to help out.

And, by the time everyone’s taken their seats and Mike’s announcing the theme for today’s lab – “Conservation of momentum, ladies and gentlemen. Or, as I like to put it, an excuse to play with toy cars.” – Melanie’s strange question is mostly forgotten.

For the moment, that is.

It's been a quiet afternoon and El can't say she minds at all. She's been on the job for a little over 5 weeks, but it feels like it's been *months* and El still can't believe this is her life now, so the quiet gives her a moment to breathe.

This time last year, she was roaming the backstage halls of the Lincoln Center and the Metropolitan Opera House as a principal dancer for the American Ballet Theatre, touring in countries all over the world, dancing on stage in front of *thousands*. Now she's in a cozy, carpeted office in a private Catholic school in Chicago, her diploma from Columbia in developmental psychology hanging on the wall, a couple of framed pictures on her desk next to a bowl of candy she's usually able to resist dipping into, and a homey brownstone only a few miles away.

El Hopper traded a whirlwind lifestyle of sparkling performance halls, tulle, and pointe shoes for the much more sedate world of high school hallways, soft, professional skirts, and low heels. And she's *never* been happier.

Oh, sure, she still dances – she has an audition for a semi-professional dance troupe later this evening, in fact – but there's not the same pressure to be perfect, to stay thin, to be on the road all the time, all things that sapped away her love for dancing. Plus, now, she gets to help kids while also teaching and it's so fulfilling, El almost doesn't know what to do with herself.

El's gaze drifts over to one of the framed pictures on her desk, the one of her and her dad on the day she graduated from Columbia only a few months ago. The sun's shining as they stand outside, her in her cap and gown, him in a suit that's a little too rumpled, but both of them looking happy and proud. Jim Hopper never went to college, but that doesn't at all diminish the pride El knows he feels for her for getting her bachelor's degree, even if it took her longer than normal.

Really the best dad anyone could ask for, El thinks as she smiles over at the picture. She knows there are pictures of her graduation that show the whole family, but El likes the one with just her and her dad, likes what it symbolizes. They've come a long way since the sad days back in Indianapolis, through Terry Hopper nee Ives' slow breakdown

during El's elementary school years, to the bitter divorce that dragged throughout middle school, to starting over again with just the two of them during her high school years.

Hop was there for her for all the dance recitals and the ballet camps and the auditions and bleeding toes and taped-on ice packs and El knows she wouldn't be here without him. He was the first person she told when she made it into the American Ballet Theatre and the first person she told when she decided she wanted to go back to school to get her degree, that she was getting tired of dancing professionally and wanted to help kids who went through things like she did during middle and high school. Whenever there is big news in El's life, Hop is the first person she calls.

Part of why she loves living in Chicago is that she's so much closer to him now than when she lived in New York – she can count the hours it takes to drive to him on one hand and still have fingers left over compared to the all day trip it was by car from New York – and she can be there for him much easier than she's been able to in the past. Plus, she's not flying around all over the world anymore and she's usually in the same time zone he's in (because Indiana and it's weird enforcement of Daylight Savings), so she can call him on a more regular basis.

Maybe I'll call him tonight, let him know about my audition, El thinks as she turns back to her computer screen and the Youtube video that she's in the middle of watching. One of the perks of being a dance teacher is that she has a legitimate reason to watch music videos on the internet during work hours, especially when her students have expressed an interest in maybe doing some hip-hop style dancing. Right now, she's taking them through basic ballet, but El's well versed in a whole host of styles and, well, hip-hop's really fun to dance to.

El's only got one earbud in when a knock and a chorus of giggles sounds off to her left by her open office door and El hurries to pause her video and remove her earbud. She turns to see the three girls she's begun calling "The Trio" standing in her office door: seniors Melanie Decatur, Paula Griffin, and Caroline Buffet, all primly dressed in pleated grey skirts and white button down shirts. They're in her dance class and they come by her office almost every day,

mostly just to talk and gripe and worry about college. El knows how much they look up to her, how cool and glamorous they think her previous life was, and they follow her around, seeking her approval in a way that's as heartening as it is tiring.

Still, El likes them and thinks they're mostly sweet girls – they remind her a little of herself when she was in high school, all eager and ambitious – so El finds herself smiling. “Hello, ladies, what can I do for you today?” El asks as she leans back in her chair, one leg crossing over the other delicately.

It's Melanie who leads the charge, plopping down in the middle chair El has in front of her desk, with Paula and Caroline flanking her on either side. “Hi, Ms. Hopper, we were hoping you could settle something for us.”

“It's really silly,” Caroline says. “But we got to talking and, well, we need an extra opinion.”

El tries to tamp down her smile, wondering what could be so silly. *Can't possibly be any sillier than the two freshman girls who were fighting over who got to be Justin Bieber's girlfriend.* “Well, that's what I'm here for. Shoot.”

The three girls eye each other, looking uncertain, before they turn back to El. “Ok, so, we were talking about who the hottest teacher here at St. Ignatius is,” Melanie starts.

“*Marci and Jenny* said it was Mr. Barnes, the British Lit teacher,” Paula says.

“But *we*,” Melanie says, gesturing between her and the other two. “Think it's Mr. Wheeler, the Chem/Physics teacher.”

“We're right, aren't we?” Caroline asks. “There's *no way* Mr. Barnes is hotter than Mr. Wheeler.”

“What do you think, Ms. Hopper? Mr. Wheeler is *way* better looking, right?” Paula asks.

Ok, scratch that earlier thought. *This* is sillier than two freshman girls fighting over a celebrity.

El really doesn't want to entertain answering this question – she's still new at this school and is *not* about to put herself in a position of objectifying her co-workers in front of her students. But, naturally, now she can't help but compare the two teachers in question: Mr. Barnes and Mr. Wheeler – whose first names are both Michael, weirdly enough, though Mr. Barnes prefers to go by "Mick", while Mr. Wheeler prefers "Mike" (and there are suddenly *too many* Michaels in her life right now).

Mick Barnes is, well...not exactly El's type (partially because he's around 10 years older than she is), but she can see why someone might be attracted to him. Slightly taller than average, mildly pleasing features, medium brown hair he takes great care to keep nicely styled – El thinks it's probably his sweet personality and penchant for passionately and romantically reading British literature out loud in his classes that makes him more attractive than he probably actually is.

And Mike Wheeler? Well, out of all the male teachers, Mike Wheeler's definitely the cutest, she'll give him that. He's taller and thinner than she usually goes for – which, given her horrendous dating history and who she's been attracted to in the past, maybe it's time for a shakeup in that department – and, from what she's seen, he's great with his students.

The ladies room is just a couple of doors down from Mike's classroom and he often teaches with the door open, his voice carrying down the hall. El's not ashamed to say that she's stopped to watch him teach a handful of seconds at a time on her way up and down the hall and she wishes that there had been someone so excited about teaching science when she was in high school. All of his students seem to really like him, from what she's heard them say. They think he's cool, probably because he's around her age, late 20s, and doesn't seem *too* much older than the students themselves, especially because of his boyish energy.

Still, El's not going to tell this trio of senior girls *any* of this, so she just smiles. "I don't know either of them well enough to say," is how she answers. "How attractive someone is, is so much more than how they look. Besides." She pauses, giving them a stern look. "I'm sure there are other people you can ask this question, right?"

The three girls pout at her non-answer. “Yeah, we guess,” Caroline says.

“Sorry to bother you, Ms. Hopper,” Melanie says.

“Oh, you’re not bothering me at all,” El says. “You girls have a free period right now?”

Paula nods. “Yeah, but we should probably go do some homework for Government.”

“Right, we have that paper due next week,” Melanie says as she reaches into the bowl of candy on El’s desk and pulls out a fun sized Snickers, the other two girls following suit. “Well, we’ll see you later, Ms. Hopper.”

“See you in dance class tomorrow, ladies,” El says and, with a final chorus of “Bye, Ms. Hopper,” the three girls exit El’s office and she’s alone once more, watching the door with what feels like the world’s most confused look on her face.

Just what in the hell was that all about?

Once school’s out for the day, Mike’s only home for as long as it takes to change into his running gear before he’s back out the door, the cooling autumn afternoon perfect for getting in a quick 5 mile run.

Or it would have been if his agent hadn’t called halfway through his run. Mike answers, because he *has* to – he can ignore text messages while he’s at work, but once it’s gotten to the point of either his agent or his editor calling him, there’s no ignoring his phone anymore. So, Mike slips his phone from his pocket, his ringtone cutting into the music that’s playing through his headphones, and slides across the screen to answer. “Hi, Kelly,” Mike says, slowing his pace down to a walk.

Kelly Stark, one of the fiercest women Mike’s *ever* met, lets out a noise that almost sounds like she’s concerned about him. “Why are

you breathing so hard?”

Mike rolls his eyes. “I’m in the middle of a run.”

“Hmm, well, sorry about that,” Kelly says, sounding the complete opposite of *sorry*. “Did Amir manage to get a hold of you?” Amir is Mike’s editor, a deceptively soft-spoken Middle Eastern man whose quick wit and sharp eye always make Mike both glad and fearful that he has someone so perceptive and detail oriented looking over his work.

“Um, no?” Mike says. “Sorry, I got his text, but I was in the middle of teaching.”

Kelly lets out a sound of annoyance. “Michael, honey, when are you going to give up this teaching thing and commit to writing full time? You know Scholastic will gladly accept manuscripts at a faster pace, don’t you?”

Mike sighs, even as the usual excited thrill rolls down his spine at the mention of his publisher – he can’t *believe* he was able to sign with Scholastic, but, given that he’s being touted as the next JK Rowling, maybe it isn’t *so* surprising – and he’s shaking his head even though he knows Kelly can’t see him. “I’ve told you before, I’m not giving up teaching. I love it too much.”

“Hmm, I know. Can’t blame me for trying, though.”

It’s an old argument, familiar and well-trodden, and Mike lets it fade away. “So, why are you calling? What’s so urgent that both you *and* Amir are trying to get a hold of me?”

“Well, one, where in the *hell* are your next chapters? It’s been weeks, Michael.”

Mike groans. “Kelly, we’ve *talked* about this. The school year just started and I’m still settling in. You’ll get them in a few weeks, I promise.”

“You and your promises, Mike. I need to see these chapters. People are clamoring for the next DL Williams novel and I need to know that progress is being made.”

Mike cringes at the mention of his penname – an amalgamation, of course, of his best friends’ names – and it still feels like DL Williams is a completely separate entity from Mike Wheeler. “Kelly, I swear, I’m working on it. Look, I have a completely clear weekend where I’m planning on writing. If you just leave me alone for a little while, I will have something for you next week, ok? It won’t be 5 chapters, but it’ll be *something*.”

Kelly sighs and Mike just *knows* she’s rolling her eyes. “I suppose that’ll have to do. Especially because of the other reason I’m calling.”

There’s a long silence that stretches over the line as Mike waits for Kelly to speak and he rolls his eyes when he realizes she’s going to make him *ask*. “What is it, Kelly?”

“Lionsgate made an offer for the film rights.”

At that, Mike stops in the middle of the sidewalk, gasping at the shock of the news. “How much?” he asks, unable to speak any higher than just above a whisper. And when Kelly tells him, Mike almost feels like he’s going to faint. “Wow, that’s, uh...that’s a lot of zeros.”

“Well, you know the publisher will take a cut, and so will I as part of my commission, but, even with what’s left, you’ll never have to worry about money again if this deal goes through.”

Holy shit. Mike grabs hold of a nearby streetlamp to keep himself upright. There’s of course, no guarantees on any offer until the ink’s dry, but just the fact that a film studio made an offer.... “Well, I trust you to negotiate on my behalf, you know that,” Mike says, hoping he sounds *way* more confident than he’s feeling right now.

Kelly scoffs. “Of course. That’s why you pay me, Mr. Wheeler,” she says, gently and chidingly teasing. “Seriously, though, this is fantastic news.”

“Yeah. Oh my god, I can’t believe it,” Mike says. “Are they ok with the fact that the last two books aren’t out yet?” Mike’s novels, about a group of teenagers who attend an academy to learn how to fight monsters and end up having to save the world, are part of a quartet and only the first half of them are out, with Mike currently working

on the third.

“Well, didn’t stop Harry Potter,” Kelly points out. “And you saw how well that worked.”

“Ok, true,” Mike says as he resumes his walk home. On the way, Kelly continues to talk about tactics and counter offers and BATNAs, with Mike mostly just nodding and making committal noises every once in a while. And he only gets off the phone with her as he walks the last 100 feet to the walkway of his townhouse, shock still lingering in his limbs. He stops at the end of the walkway and stares down at his phone, thinking about it only a second before he opens up his text messages. Man, he *really* doesn't want to be alone right now, he's so excited.

So, it’s a quick couple of taps before he’s typing in one, simple message: *hey, anyone up for a beer?*

Mike grabs a quick shower before he’s out the door once more, making a quick stop at the store down the street for a 12 pack on his way to his destination. Before Mike knows it, he’s standing in front of the door to an apartment, case of beer in one hand while he knocks with the other. He can hear the sounds of laughter and talking inside and he rolls his eyes. *The last one here, again.*

The door opens and Lucas’ smiling face greets him. “Wheeler!” Lucas greets him, like it’s been months since they last saw each other instead of *two days ago*.

“Hey, man,” Mike says as the two hug quickly.

“Dude, you’re late!” Dustin cries out from where he’s sitting on the couch, the light from his phone screen illuminating his face.

Mike throws him a look. “Don’t insult the man with the beer, Dustin,” Mike says as he steps into the apartment and Lucas closes the door behind him.

“Yeah, Dustin,” Will says, grinning from where he’s sitting next to Dustin, game controller in hand, the track select screen for Mario Kart emblazoned on Lucas’ TV screen. “Or did you want to watch us drink your portion of the case while you sit there, stone cold sober?”

Dustin rolls his eyes. “Geez, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“You’re forgiven,” Mike says around a small laugh before he turns to Lucas. “Hey, I’m gonna put this in the fridge and open up a round.”

“I’ll help,” Lucas says as the two move through the living room and into the kitchen.

Mike moves further into Lucas’ apartment and, as he feels the usual sense of relaxation come over him that always does when he’s with his best friends, he realizes again just *how lucky* he is.

From practically the moment Dustin moved to Hawkins in the 4th grade, the four of them have been inseparable and it’s been that way for almost 20 years, with the exception of when Mike’s dad got transferred to his company’s office in Indianapolis and the whole Wheeler family had to move right before Mike entered high school. Of course, they weathered the separation just fine, with the help of texting and online gaming – the four of them got *really* into WoW throughout high school – and, when it came time for college, they all chose to settle in Chicago so they could live in the same city once more and they haven’t been separated since.

They’ve been there for each other for all the ups and downs in each other’s lives – Mike’s family moving to Indianapolis, Will’s parents getting divorced, the thrill of sharing that crappy house their sophomore year of college, first jobs, first girlfriends (and boyfriends, in Will’s case), first heartbreaks, learning how to become adults. They’re the very best friends Mike could ever ask for, brothers in all but blood, and Mike is grateful for them each and every day.

It’s these thoughts that are running almost unnoticed in the back of Mike’s mind as he and Lucas put all the beers in the fridge except for four of them, him and Lucas making short work of the caps with a bottle opener before heading back out.

In the living room, Dustin's still on his phone while Will's competing against the AI in a Mario Kart race and, as Mike hands a beer over to Dustin, the curly-haired man grimaces. "Dude, look at this," Dustin says, angling his phone towards Will while he takes the beer Mike's offering.

Pausing the game, Will looks over and cringes, looking almost like he's going to be sick, which makes any curiosity bubbling up inside Mike die a swift and sudden death. "Ew, gross! I really, *really* didn't need to see that. Oh god, I'm traumatized. How did you even *find* that picture in the first place?"

"Megan found it. There's a whole account, so there's a lot more where that came from, too."

Will sighs. "Great, just what I needed. *More* gross things for you to show me. How you got your girlfriend to share your disgusting obsession, I'll never know."

Dustin gives Will a look. "C'mon, it's not like you haven't seen it before."

"*Still,*" Will groans. "There's blood and it's all crooked and..." Will trails off with a shudder. "God, so *gross*."

"Do I even want to know?" Mike asks as he settles in the armchair adjacent to the couch, taking a sip of his beer.

"No," Will says emphatically. "Dustin has strange fetishes and likes to over-fucking-share."

"Put the damn phone away, Dustin," Lucas says, reaching out for his controller. "Are we gonna play Mario Kart or not?"

"Fine," Dustin says as he slips his phone back in his pocket. "I guess you guys want me to smoke you on Rainbow Road sooner *rather* than later, eh?"

Mike rolls his eyes and shoots Dustin a look. "*Please.* Everyone here knows that *I'm* the Rainbow Road Champion."

Dustin grins. "You willing to put down money on that, Wheeler?"

Mike grins back, feeling almost wolfish. “Bring it, Henderson.”

For a while, there’s beer and Mario Kart, and then Lucas orders a couple of pizzas and, eventually, someone makes another beer run. There’s a pause in the gaming to eat pizza and it’s during this break that Mike spills the news he got earlier.

“So, uh, I think my books are going to get turned into movies,” Mike says with no warning. “A film studio made an offer for the rights.” There’s only a relative handful of people who know Mike’s an author – pretty much just his family and the Party – so Mike doesn’t have many people to share the news with. But he really doesn’t need to have a whole crowd of people to share the news with given the way the rest of the Party reacts.

All three of them erupt all at once in loud, happy exclamations – “Dude!” – “Congratulations!” – “Holy shit, that’s awesome!” – each of them smiling and Dustin, who’s closest to Mike, reaches out for a high five.

“Which studio?” Will asks.

“Lionsgate,” Mike says. “They’re the ones who did the Hunger Games, I think.”

“Man, you’re going to be *rolling* in it,” Lucas says, smiling so wide he’s practically giddy. “How much money they offering?”

A flutter of unease ripples through Mike and he bites his lip. “I’d... rather not say until the offer’s final. Don’t want to jinx it, you know? But, it’s...a lot.”

“What’s that mean for your teaching?” Dustin asks around a mouthful of pizza.

Mike takes a sip of his beer – his 4th of the night and he should probably slow down, but he’s nice and buzzed right now – and shrugs. “Nothing’s changing, there. Still gonna teach, I like it too much. Besides, my students are a trip and where else am I going to get wacky dialogue from?” A memory flashes through his head of Melanie and her little posse asking him what he thinks of El Hopper

and it makes him laugh a bit. He's been thinking about the odd moment on and off all afternoon and into the evening and, the more he thinks about it, the more it amuses him.

"Ooh, what happened this time, Mr. Wheeler?" Will asks, teasing. "You teachers always have crazy stories about weird students and I love it, so share."

Mike shakes his head, still chuckling. "Nothing, really, just...some of the senior girls in my physics class were asking me weird questions about what I think of one of the other teachers on staff. They think she's really awesome and they were pestering me about what I think about her."

Dustin grins. "Is she hot?"

Lucas shoots Dustin a look. "Dude, you have a *girlfriend*."

"Well, is she hot?" Will echoes, smiling mischievously. "I'm curious. I mean, I'm super gay, but now my interest is piqued."

Mike laughs. "I'm sure Greg is *thrilled* you can still find women attractive." He pauses, considering the question. Is El Hopper hot? "But, I mean...I guess so?"

Dustin cringes. "Wow, Mike, not exactly a ringing endorsement."

Mike blushes, feeling misunderstood and a little annoyed. "No, that's not what I – I mean, she's really pretty, but I just – she's my coworker and I don't really know her that well? Besides, I would guess that's kinda frowned upon, being attracted to a fellow teacher."

"Aww, no inter-office romance for you," Lucas teases.

Mike takes the pizza crust on his plate and throws it at Lucas. "Dude, fuck off. It's like you *want* me to get fired. Anyway, I respect my coworkers too much to objectify them like that."

"Ah, yes, Michael the Paladin rears his noble head," Will says, laughing. "You know, it's ok to think people are attractive, Mike. Even if you don't *do* anything about it. Sounds like you think this woman is pretty, though."

Mike sighs. “Yeah, she is. But, it doesn’t matter because she’s my coworker and *nothing* is going to happen.”

“Methinks the lady doth protest too much,” Dustin snickers and Will and Lucas join in.

Mike glares at all of them. “You know, I was going to invite you all to the red carpet premiere when my book gets turned into a movie, but now I guess I’ll go *alone*.”

“Maybe you can bring this teacher woman,” Lucas says under his breath.

Mike fumes. “Alright, Sinclair, that’s it. Boot up the PS4. You, me, Nidhogg, *now*.”

“You gonna *duel* me?”

“You bet your ass.”

“Oh, it’s on, Wheeler. *It’s on*.”

And when Mike loses, even though he’s still a little steamed, he lets Lucas lord the victory over him. It’ll be forgotten within a couple of hours, Mike knows – they’re just giving him shit because it’s what they do; Mike would do the same if the roles were reversed.

Besides, at the end of the day, it doesn’t matter because nothing is going to happen with El Hopper.

It just isn’t.

El’s just pulling up to the curb in front of her brownstone when her cell phone starts ringing, the car filling with the sounds of ABBA’s “Dancing Queen” – *fuck you, Max*, El thinks, wondering just when Max managed to change her ring tone. *Again*.

El hurries to put the car into park before she’s got one hand digging

through her purse for her phone and it's only when she's killed the engine that she manages get her phone in her hand to swipe across the screen and answer, not even taking a moment to see who's calling. "Hello?" she says, a little out of breath from the scramble.

"Ellie! I didn't get you at a bad time, did I?"

El smiles as the sound of Jim Hopper's voice comes through the speaker. "Dad, hi!" El twists to grab her duffle bag from the back seat before looping her wrist through the strap of her purse so she can carry both in one go. "I just got home from rehearsal. I tried calling you earlier, but you didn't pick up."

There's a sigh from the other end of the line as El gets out of the car, making sure her keys are solidly gripped in the hand not holding the phone. "Bit of a crazy day. I'm filling in for one of my guys – it's his anniversary tonight – and there's just a mountain of paperwork that I'm trying to tackle. I can't put it off any longer and it's taunting me."

El lets out a laugh. "Aww, I'm sorry you have to face the evil paperwork. Catch any bad guys today?"

"Not yet," Hop says, laughing. "But the night's still young and people are so very stupid."

"This is true," El says as she makes her way to her front door, feeling the familiar post-rehearsal soreness tug at her muscles – it's been a few months since she's felt it quite this way and she's *missed* it. "I almost feel sorry for anyone who tries something stupid tonight."

"I'm sure any of the boyfriends you had in high school would *love* to hear you say that," Hop says, sounding amused.

El rolls her eyes. "Ugh, *dad*, leave them alone. None of them ever tried anything stupid. They were all too scared of you."

"Don't know why. I'm a lovable ray of sunshine."

"Yeah, a lovable ray of 6'3" sunshine who carries a gun," El says with a snort.

Growing up with a police officer for a father was...interesting. There

were dinner time stories of stupid criminals and annoying citizens, growing up learning how shoot a gun and defend herself...and having every boy she brought home tremble in fear at the prospect of meeting her dad. Sure, Hop never did any of the stupid, over-protective father bullshit – cleaning his gun in front of her dates, thinly-veiled threats, handshakes that were crushingly firm, or shit like that – but he's a *big* guy who carries around the weight of his authority with an ease that scares almost every teenage boy in a 10 mile radius.

"Are you insinuating that I'm naturally intimidating?" Hop lets out a wounded gasp that El knows is 100% fake. "I'm *hurt* that my own daughter would say such a thing."

"Quit being such a drama queen," El says as she unlocks her front door and heads inside. "It's unbecoming in a man your age."

"Great, so I'm scary *and* old. You sure know how to make me feel good about myself, sweetheart."

"It's a gift," El says, grinning.

"Well, besides betraying and insulting your father, how are you doing? You said something about rehearsal? You dancing again?"

El closes the door behind her and drops her duffle bag down on the padded bench she put against the wall of the foyer. "Yeah, it's why I was calling earlier. I had an audition for a spot on a local dance troupe. Semi-professional, a mixture of former professional dancers and talented amateurs."

"And they made you audition?" Hop asks. "A former principle dancer for the best ballet company in the country?"

The pride in Hop's voice is as embarrassing as it is heart-warming. "I insisted," El says. "They were going to let me in without it, but I didn't want any special treatment."

"Taking nothing for granted, that's my girl," Hop says.

"Exactly," El says as she flops onto her couch. "So, I auditioned, got in, and then joined them for rehearsal. They're planning a Halloween-

themed recital that'll serve as an exhibition for the troupe, so I get to choreograph a piece to dance to, song of my choosing. I'm really excited."

"That's great! I'm happy for you, hon. And how's everything else going? Settling in ok, still?"

El looks around her still-new home – bright white walls, plush comfortable furniture, high ceilings, beech hardwood floors, all decorated with things she's gathered from her travels and colors she loves. "Yeah, everything's fine – great, even. Finally unpacked the last box a few days ago."

"And work? How's that school treating you?"

El smiles. "Good. The other teachers are nice and the students are something else." El laughs, thinking about that moment in her office with the Trio asking her which teacher she thought was hotter. "I forgot how strange high schoolers are."

"Well, it's been 10 years since you graduated from high school," Hop says. "A long time to forget."

"Yeah, I guess," El says. "Well, anyway, I should probably take a shower and figure out what I'm going to do for dinner. It's almost 8 and I'm hungry. I just wanted to call to tell you the news about the audition."

"Well, consider me told," Hop says. "You talk to your mother, recently? She'd probably like to know, too."

El sighs as she thinks about her mom, living in an assisted living facility just outside of Indianapolis. "I was planning on telling her this weekend during our regular call."

"Hmm, good," Hop says. "She loves you, you know."

El nods. "Yeah, I know." Her relationship with her mom is *complicated*, to say the least. Aside from annoying nicknames, El had grown up with everyone calling her "El", a shortened version of the middle name given to her by her dad...except for her mother, who insisted on calling her "Jane", her legal first name. But El never felt

like “Jane” and all her attempts to get her mom to stop calling her that ended in failure, which led to a bit of resentment and a lot of annoyance. Then everything else fell apart as her mother’s mental condition deteriorated and her parents divorced and it’s been a long road to building an adult relationship between mother and daughter.

It's not like El doesn't like her mom, it's just El's always been her father's daughter more than her mother's – sassy and wisecracking and stubborn – but it's from her mom that she got her love of dancing; it was her mom who encouraged her to *start* ballet in the first place. And, despite the minor disagreement over what name El was called by and all the history that lays between them, El still loves her mom, will *always* love her mom. She just wishes it were easier, sometimes.

Hop sighs. “Well, I’ll let you go, Ellie – I really do need to tackle this paperwork. Thanks for letting me know, though, about your audition. Congrats again, by the way.”

“Thanks, Dad,” El says, smiling. “Tell everyone I say hi.”

Hop grumbles. “*You* tell everyone you say hi. I’m not your damned messenger boy.”

“Yeah, yeah,” El teases, giggling a bit. “Bye, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Ellie.”

El drops the phone on the couch after the call hangs up and she lets out a soft sigh, just *existing* for a moment before she gets up to go about showering and then figuring out dinner.

A half an hour later finds El sitting back down on the couch, a simple meal of a grilled chicken breast and a salad in front of her on a TV tray, a glass of white wine sitting next to her plate, while she browses through Netflix for *something* to watch – *too many choices, so overwhelming*. She’s just debating between a couple of crime shows when her phone buzzes with an incoming text message. El sets down the remote and reaches for her phone, smiling at the words that flash across the screen: *call me bitch.*

Chuckling, El navigates to her contacts with a few easy taps on the screen and then the phone's ringing against her ear. A moment later, Max picks up. "Hey."

"You want me to call you a bitch?" El asks, not even returning the greeting. She's been friends with Max long enough that greetings aren't necessary.

"Excuse me?" Max says, sounding confused.

"Your text message. 'Call me bitch'. You're asking me to call you a bitch. Or should it have been 'Call me, comma, bitch'? In which case, you're calling *me* a bitch and I'm still not sure if I'm going to take offense to that or not."

El can practically hear Max's eye roll through the phone. "Oh god, you're such a grammar nazi. Why are we friends again?"

El laughs. "Well, I punched Cindy Moore in the face after she pulled on your pigtails so hard you slammed into the ground in 1st grade and, somehow, here we are now. Friendship borne from violence is the only kind of friendship I know."

Max snorts. "Ain't that the truth." El and Max have been best friends, practically sisters, since the 1st grade, after the aforementioned pigtail pulling incident. Max and El went to the same school Indianapolis after Max moved to Indiana when she was 6. Inseparable all throughout elementary and middle school, they stayed best friends even after El transferred schools for high school and went off to become a professional dancer instead of going to college. Sure, they visited each other when they could and talked on the phone and texted as often as possible. But it wasn't the same as actually being able to see each other on a regular basis and they missed each other terribly. But now with El living in Chicago, she and Max finally live in the same city again after almost 15 years and it's *fantastic*.

"So, what's up?" El asks, taking a sip of her wine.

"Just wondering if you wanted to go see the new Marvel movie," Max says.

El lets out a noise that's part sigh and part groan. "There's *another* one of those?"

"El, honey," Max says, like El should know better. "There's *always* another one of those. Did you want to go, though? There's a showing at the theater near my apartment at 6:00 and we could grab dinner beforehand if you wanted."

El almost says yes before she remembers. "Oh god, I can't. There's a staff meeting until 6 tomorrow afternoon. Sorry," El says with a cringe.

"Nah, it's ok, I get it. Work comes first," Max says. "So, you get to be stuck in a room with your coworkers for a few hours. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?"

El shrugs, not that Max can see it. "Don't really know. I'm still getting to know everyone. Too soon to say if I'm going to hate everyone I work with."

"Hmm, well, hopefully you won't want to go on a murder spree after your staff meeting, then," Max says. "How about this weekend then? Same time, but on Saturday instead?"

"Yeah, sounds good. Just let me know where to meet you for dinner," El says. "Actually, wait. Isn't there a cute Mexican restaurant not far from your apartment? How about we do margaritas and fajitas before the movie? If I'm going to sit through another superhero movie, I want to be well lubricated beforehand."

Max sighs. "It's not like I'm forcing you to go against your will or anything, but, fine, yeah, margaritas sound awesome."

There's a bit more chatter as El and Max arrange an exact time and place to meet and then they're hanging up, leaving El back to figuring out what to watch while she eats dinner, a small smile on her face the entire time. She's close to friends and family, has a job that she loves more and more every day, and her future has never seemed brighter. Moving to Chicago is going to be the best decision El's ever made.

She just knows it.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, whaddya think? :D

Coming up next: Mike and El get assigned to work together and things *really* start happening...

2. The Start of Something New

Notes for the Chapter:

On to chapter two! Mike and El *actually* interact in this one, too!

Again, shout out to Ely (EvieSmallwood) and Lina (Fourth Horse) for being the bestest people on the face of the planet and helping me with this undertaking and inspiring so much of what goes in here. I feel like I should probably just gift this whole fic to the both of you, tbh. I love you both very much and thank you for *everything*. *all the hugs*

Right, let's get this fluff train going, shall we?

I am filled with regrets.

The thought's been Mike's mantra all fucking day. He'd been in such a celebratory mood the night before, surrounded by friends and buoyed by professional success, that he hadn't stopped at 4 beers and just...kept going, getting drunker than he really should on a school night. And Drunk Mike very easily forgets that he's closer to 30 than 20 and he *cannot* drink 6 beers in an evening without feeling the effects the next day. (Drunk Mike is a selfish asshole and Sober-Yet-Hungover Mike hates him *so much*.) He's just been dragging ass just *all day* and, of course, he would be nursing the most insidious of all-day hangovers on the day of the monthly staff meeting. Because, *of course*.

His morning classes are *horrible*. His head's pounding and his stomach is sour, so he's short tempered and a little too biting with his students – god, he's pretty sure he almost made Owen Graves *cry* in Chem lab (to be fair, the kid was messing around with his Bunsen burner, trying to light a pen on fire, so Mike doesn't feel *too* bad about practically tearing the kid a new one as he gave the kid detention, but...still).

Mike's just a *bear* until lunch, where he takes it upon himself to hole

up in the office in the back of his classroom and catches a quick nap hunched over his desk, arms wrapped around his head to keep the light out the best he can. It only helps a little, but it's better than nothing. That plus a half a peanut butter sandwich to go with the Advil helps cure him of his headache and his stomach no longer feels like it's trying to turn itself inside out.

But then it's the afternoon and Mike's just tired. He's gotten to the point of the hangover recovery where all he wants to do is crawl into bed and sleep forever. But sleep is just going to have to wait because he has a staff meeting to go to.

The final bell of the day rings and Mike cringes at the sound of his nemesis for the past 8 hours. The bell's been *torture*, especially because it's soon followed by the sound of his students erupting in noisy shouts as they're released from class. And, since it's the last class of the day, the students are even more exuberant than usual.

"Remember to read chapter 5 on covalent bonds," Mike yells out to his Honors Chemistry class as they hurry to gather their things. "We will be covering types of bonds and chemical polarity in class tomorrow, so do the reading. There won't be time to cover the intro in lecture, so make sure you're prepared!"

But, only about half the students appear to be listening and Mike can only shake his head as he watches his students all but run out of the classroom. "Yeah, tomorrow's lecture is gonna be *fun*," Mike mutters to himself with a shake of his head.

And then he's alone in his classroom and Mike *finally* lets out the sigh of exhaustion that's been waiting all day for him to exhale. His shoulders slump, gravity feels like it's suddenly doubled, and the floor's never looked so comfortable. He's just so *tired*. And, as he glances at the clock to see that he's only got 15 minutes until the 4 o'clock staff meeting, he still has over two hours to go until he can collapse in his bed and sleep for 12 hours.

Mike groans and takes a deep breath to fortify himself. Right, if he's going to make it through this staff meeting, he's gonna need coffee. After briefly tidying up the classroom – rearranging lab stools, picking up random pieces of garbage – Mike grabs his coffee mug and

heads for the teacher's lounge.

There's a few students hanging around the hallways as Mike makes his way to the teacher's lounge, but the ones who catch his eye only wave as Mike walks past. God, he must look worse than he thought. The students are usually eager to say hi to him. If they're just waving, he must be scaring them away as he finishes suffering under his hangover.

The teacher's lounge is empty as Mike walks inside, which speaks to how much he's running behind. Mike hurries to pour himself a mug of lukewarm coffee from a mostly empty carafe and he sticks the mug in the microwave to blast some heat back into the liquid. After a quick splash of cream to mask the burnt taste of the coffee, though it can only help so much – *god, who's brewing this coffee? Are they running the grounds through a carburetor first, or something?* – Mike rushes from the teacher's lounge to the staff meeting room.

He's not late, but it's a near thing. Everyone else is already in the large room, nearly every chair filled and Mike looks around the room, searching for a seat. He finds one and looks across the table to see who he'll be sitting across from, his gaze immediately landing on El Hopper, her head just turned away from his direction as she talks to Liz Hiroto, the Calculus teacher, who's sitting next to her.

El is smiling, full lips gently curving, as she talks rather animatedly, dimples appearing beneath cheeks that are lightly flushed with either excitement or exertion, Mike's not sure, but it's really pretty either way. Her hair's pulled up in a high ponytail, soft curls swaying behind her when she moves her head to punctuate whatever she's saying. And the black top she's wearing is tight and wide-necked, showing off the graceful sweep of her collarbones and the lithe curves of her arms and torso.

Not just pretty. Beautiful, his traitorous brain whispers. Mike shakes his head to clear the thought – he's *so* not going there now, not when he has to sit across from her for the next two hours. He totally blames the rest of the Party for egging him on with “is she hot?” questions for why he suddenly can't stop noticing how attractive El Hopper is.

“Ah, Mr. Wheeler, nice of you to finally join us.”

The words are spoken by the principal, Mr. Russell, an African-American man in his early 50s who dresses immaculately in a 3-piece suit every day. And he's making Mike very, *very* aware that he's just been standing here, staring at El like an idiot for at least 15 seconds. Especially because now everyone else in the room is looking at him.

Mike can't help the way he blushes and he inwardly curses. "Sorry," he says to the rest of the room. "Just...yeah, sorry." Mike hurries to take the only open seat and, once he's seated, cup of coffee resting neatly in front of him, he looks across the table to see El looking back at him. She's smiling at him gently, reassuringly, and it makes him feel warm in a way that has his heart skipping a beat or two inside his chest.

No, this is not happening.

Still, Mike finds himself smiling back before Mr. Russell calls the room to order and then the meeting's underway. For a while, Mike's mostly able to keep from looking across the table at El. But he's hyperaware of her presence and he can't stop noticing her just out of the corner of his eye as he watches Mr. Russell lead the meeting.

Most of the meeting goes in one ear and out the other – updates on student applications for the following school year, possible changes to the current course offerings, various housekeeping items – Mike's tired and not exactly paying attention, which is only made worse by the way his brain can't stop harping on the fact that El Hopper is sitting just across from him and, *gosh, isn't she pretty*. Clearly, he's cracked – he's tired and still kind of hungover and the Party's comments about El being attractive have lodged in his brain – and what he needs is *sleep*. It's the only cure to get him *back to normal* where he can stop noticing how pretty his coworker is.

And then something happens.

"Right, next order of business," Mr. Russell says. "This year's Winter Ball." Mike barely holds back a groan and he has the worst sinking feeling in his stomach that is 100% *not* because of his hangover. "I sent out an email last week asking for volunteers to be the faculty supervisors and, well, I only got one response."

Someone lets out a loud snort and Mike turns to look at Mr. Nielsen, one of the history teachers. “Don’t see why there needs to be a faculty supervisor in the first place. The students do most of the work and we’re just over-glorified babysitters.” To that, Mike can attest; he was one of the faculty supervisors *last* year and it was one of the most boring assignments Mike’s ever had.

“Accountability, Jack,” Mr. Russell says. “I know our students, especially the ones in student government, are responsible young adults, but we need to make sure all our tracks are covered.”

“Well, count me out,” Liz Hiroto says. “I don’t have time to spend in dance committee meetings.”

Liz Hiroto’s comment sets off a flurry of similar mutterings and Mr. Russell almost has to shout to be heard over the fray. “Alright, alright!” he says, gesturing for everyone to settle down. “I figured it would come down to this, so I am assigning faculty supervisors and this is *non-negotiable*.” Everyone groans and Mike groans along with them, even as he thinks they all suddenly sound no better than any of their students when confronted with a pop quiz.

Mr. Russell waits for a moment before he continues to speak, looking at Mike and Mike just wants the earth to swallow him whole right now as it feels like the other shoe is just about to drop. “Mike, since you were one of the faculty supervisors last year, and you’re one of the least senior staff members, you’re going to be working with the only person who volunteered – El Hopper.”

And there’s the other shoe, coming crashing down to the ground. Mike gulps and looks across the table where El’s smiling at him again, this time broader and more excited than before. It’s disarming, having the full weight of El Hopper’s gorgeous smile beaming in his direction, and Mike wants to go back to yesterday when he wasn’t so aware of just how beautiful she is.

Because now he’s going to have to *work* with her.

And, suddenly, Mike Wheeler is *really* nervous.

There's not too much left of the staff meeting after Mike and El are assigned as the Winter Ball's faculty supervisors – information about upcoming events, preparations for the Christmas Tableau, etc. – and once Mr. Russell announces that there are no more agenda items and he sets them free, El immediately looks across the table at Mike, hoping to catch his eye.

Like he can sense her looking over at him, Mike meets her gaze as he stands, the look in his eyes confused and tired. El gives what she hopes is a reassuring smile and raises her eyebrows beseechingly. “Hey, do you have a moment to talk?” she asks, loud enough to be heard over all the other conversations happening around her.

Mike’s brow furrows, like he’s even more confused, but he nods. “Uh, yeah, sure, of course. Teacher’s lounge? I need to wash out my mug,” he says, giving her a small smile as he gestures with the mug in his hand, long fingers wrapping securely around the ceramic.

“Yeah, sure, sounds good,” El says, getting out of her chair. She looks over at Liz, who’s standing at the same time. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Liz.”

“Have a good night, El,” Liz says, smirking a bit as she leans in. “Careful with that one,” she says under her breath, tone wry and conspiratorial. “He’s having a bad day.”

El lets out a giggle and shakes her head. “I’m not easily intimidated, Liz.” El trills her fingers at Liz in a wave and weaves through the gentle press of bodies around her to the other side of the room where Mike is waiting by the door. “Lead on, Mr. Wheeler,” she says, trying to contain the grin that threatens to tug up the corners of her lips.

El knows she’s failing miserably by the way Mike breathes out a laugh and smiles back, his own lips quirking in a grin that’s cuter than it has any right to be, despite the exhaustion she can see around the edges of his face. “Ladies first,” Mike says, gesturing with a sweep of his arm towards the door.

El arches an eyebrow at him – *clearly, someone was raised to be a*

gentleman – and pushes past him towards the door and out into the hallway. Her kitten heels clack lightly against the floor and the skirt of the long-sleeved, lycra dress she wears while teaching dance class (which was where she was right before the staff meeting) swishes around the bottoms of her thighs as she turns to look at Mike while he steps up beside her. She watches him while they walk and she winces in sympathy as he lets out a tired sigh. “Are you ok?” she asks after a few moments, hoping she’s not being too nosy.

Mike lets out a hum of affirmation. “Had a little too much fun last night,” he says, smiling ruefully at her. “I forget sometimes that I’m not 22 anymore, you know?”

El lets out a laugh. “Got a little too ‘three sheets to the wind?’”

Mike echoes her laugh. “Something like that,” he says, the fingers of his free hand running through his hair in a nervous gesture, his hand lingering just above the nape of his neck. “I’m at the point where I just want to sleep for 24 hours.”

El smiles softly at him as they approach the door for the teacher’s lounge. “Well, I won’t keep you long, then.”

Mike grins. “Promise?”

(the word does something weird in the bottom of her heart, an echo of déjà vu that tingles along the back of her neck, but the feeling is faint and over before el can think on it too closely.)

“I promise,” El says, maybe more solemnly than she means to, but she’s still smiling just a bit as she speaks, so she probably doesn’t come off as *too* weird. El pushes open the door for the teacher’s lounge and holds it for Mike as he follows through behind her.

“So,” Mike says as he heads over to the sink. “What did you want to talk about?”

El follows, leaning against the counter as she watches Mike rinse out his mug, his movements efficient and graceful. For a moment, she’s hypnotized by the curl and the length of his fingers before she manages to shake herself out of it. *Get it together, Hopper*, she thinks,

wondering just what in the hell is wrong with her. “Oh, um, I just wanted to get some time with you next week to talk about the Winter Ball. I know you were one of the faculty supervisors last year and, well....” El trails off, biting her lip as hesitancy creeps up her spine. “I just want to make sure this goes well for the students. And since you planned it last year....” El shrugs. “I just don’t want to screw it up.”

Mike turns off the faucet and reaches for the dishtowel that’s folded by the sink. “You won’t,” Mike says, voice soft and gentle with assurance. “Besides, it’s impossible to screw up. The kids know what they’re doing, believe it or not.” Mike shrugs, turning to face her. “We’re mostly just there to make sure nothing goes wrong. It really is a lot of babysitting and keeping track of the details so they don’t blow through their entire budget.”

El looks up at him and she’s struck for half a second by the splash of freckles across Mike’s nose and cheeks. She’s never been close enough to notice them before. “Still, I’d appreciate it if you could walk me through what to expect.”

Mike grins. “Yeah, sure, if it’ll help. The first dance committee meeting isn’t until the week after next, so sometime after school next week should work.”

“How about Monday?” El offers, hoping she doesn’t come across as too eager.

Mike cringes. “I have plans after school on Monday. Would Tuesday work?”

“I have dance rehearsal on Tuesdays,” El says. “Wednesday?”

Mike smiles as he sets down the dishtowel and starts heading back out of the teacher’s lounge. “Wednesday works.”

El smiles back. “Good, looking forward to it,” she says, walking next to him. “Well, I should let you go,” she says once they reach her office, with his classroom just down the hall. “Sleep off the rest of that hangover.” El giggles and is aware that she’s smiling mischievously, but she can’t stop herself.

Mike chuckles, even though he's shaking his head at her. "Fine, mock my pain." He quiets, smile softening. "Have a good night, El."

"Night, Mike."

Mike gives El a small wave before he walks towards his classroom. El starts to turn to head into her office, but her gaze lingers on Mike's form as he walks away. There's an easy grace to how he moves, all tall and lean, and El finds herself admiring the span of his shoulders beneath the pale blue dress shirt he's wearing, how his hair brushes against his collar, the way the narrow trim of his waist leads down to the length of his leg beneath the fitted slacks he wears.

And then El blinks, clearing her head and chiding herself for the blush that spreads across her cheeks. "Geeze, what is *wrong* with me?" she mutters to herself before she heads into her office to grab her things. Whatever it is, she needs to get a handle on it.

And fast.

True to form, Mike goes home after the staff meeting and pretty much just falls asleep. He eats a quick dinner of leftover stir fry from a couple of nights ago before he collapses in bed, barely remembering to get undressed so he doesn't sleep in his slacks and button down.

And, for almost 12 hours, Mike is dead to the world. When he wakes up on Friday, he feels like a brand new person, even managing to squeeze a half hour of laps at the pool before classes start for the day.

It's a surprisingly quiet day, except for his Honors Chem class, which, like he expected, mostly *didn't* do the reading he assigned to them. Still, despite that, everything else goes smoothly. The only other hiccup (if it can be called that) is El Hopper. And not so much *her*, but more about how he's suddenly unable to notice anyone else when she's in the same room. Granted, he only sees her once on Friday, but it's still enough to send his thoughts into a tailspin.

He's standing in the teacher's lounge, waiting for the microwave to finish reheating his lunch, when a strange frisson of energy runs down the back of his neck, prompting him to turn and look over his shoulder. He turns just in time to see El walk into the teacher's lounge, heading straight for the refrigerator where, presumably, she's been keeping her lunch. She notices him and gives him a small smile and it's like the whole world slows, *stops*, as he smiles back.

El's beautiful in a way that just seems effortless, all natural grace and soft skin and warm smiles. It's Friday, so everyone's dressed casually, and El's no exception, wearing fitted jeans and a sheer, green blouse that does little to hide the svelte lines of her torso. And her hair is down, falling down her back in rich, lush waves, ends just curling beneath her shoulder blades, and Mike has the overwhelming urge to run his fingers through the strands, to see if it's really as soft as it looks.

The moment stretches for an eternity as Mike watches El grab her lunch out of the fridge and, with one last smile in his direction, head back out the way she came. Mike can't help, *really* can't, the way his gaze drops to her hips, drawn by the gentle, easy sway of her gait, and he feels a strange sense of dread mixing with the way the rest of him warms, his skin tingling.

Shit. Shit.

This isn't happening to him. He's *not* physically attracted to his coworker. He just isn't. Nope, no way. It's *super* unprofessional and it's going to ruin *everything*.

But, goddammit, he can't seem to stop it. He 100% blames the rest of the Party for putting this idea in his head in the first place, for forcing him to think about how attractive El Hopper really is.

(he knows it's not their fault, not really. el hopper is a very beautiful woman and it was really only a matter of time until he fully paid attention and noticed.)

Maybe it won't be that bad, Mike tries to reason with himself throughout the day. It's not like he's never been around women he's found attractive before (he *has* had girlfriends in the past, *thank you*

very much). And it's not like being attracted to a woman means anything other than *that*. He can be friends and coworkers with a woman he finds attractive and not have it turn into anything.

(Right? Right?)

So, yeah, other than that *startling* revelation, Friday passes without much of note. And then it's the weekend and Mike has two days to *not* think about El Hopper.

It's an exercise in failure.

He can't stop thinking about the way she smiled at him, concerned about his hangover, or the way she bit her lip as she told him she wanted to make sure she didn't screw up helping plan the Winter Ball, all earnest and eager, or the way she teased him about sleeping off his hangover before wishing him good night, her eyes sparkling, her voice soft and lilting and almost too intimate.

Of course, these thoughts run in the back of his head the entire weekend, but he can mostly ignore them, especially when sufficiently distracted.

Like, for instance, when Dustin suggests that the Party all go disco bowling on Saturday night and Mike finds himself surrounded by neon carpeting and black lights and glow-in-the-dark bowling balls. Megan and Greg are there, so it's not just the core Party, but there's hot wings and nacho and beer and it's a great time, especially since everyone *sucks* at bowling. It almost becomes a competition to see who can bowl the *worst*, with Lucas and Dustin in particular trying to show each other up for just how badly they can bowl.

"So, Mike, how's the school year treating you?"

Mike looks away from the ridiculous competition Lucas and Dustin are engaged in and smiles over at Megan from where she's sitting next to him on the vinyl bench by the lane they're using. "Pretty good," Mike says. "I've only had to give 3 kids detention so far, so I'm considering that a win."

Megan smiles, shaking her head. "I sometimes still can't believe

you're a teacher. I remember when you were too shy to get up in front of the class to read your book report."

Mike blushes and glares. "Hey, no bringing up old history, Megan." He's known Megan Shaughnessy almost as long as he's known Lucas and Will, and definitely longer than he's known Dustin. Like the rest of the Party, Megan is from Hawkins and has been part of his life in some shape or form since he was 6. He still gets embarrassed sometimes when he remembers the crush he had on her back in 5th grade, especially considering that she and Dustin have been dating since just after college.

Man, 10 year old me would be really jealous of Dustin right now, Mike thinks, looking over at Megan's flowing blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes. She's a beautiful woman and, for a while, exactly the type of woman Mike found himself primarily attracted to. *Not anymore,* the traitorous voice in the back of his mind whispers, bringing with it visions of honey brown hair and chocolate eyes flecked with gold.

Oh, shut up.

"Sorry," Megan says, pulling Mike's attention back to the present.

"We talking about old history?" Greg asks from across the other bench.

Will's snuggled against Greg's side and he laughs. "Please don't," Will says. "We'll eventually get to the point where people will be pulling out old pictures on our phones and I am *really* not in the mood."

Mike laughs. "You're just embarrassed about that bowl cut your mom gave you when you were 10."

Will groans. "This is *exactly* what I was afraid of. Thanks for cutting to the chase, Wheeler."

Mike grins, happiness bubbling up in his chest. "No problem, Byers. Any time."

"I bet you were adorable," Greg says, leaning over to press a kiss against Will's temple.

“Right,” Will lets out a snort even as he blushes hard enough to be visible beneath the black lights. “I looked like an 80s movie reject.”

“It’s true,” Mike says. “It was pretty hideous.”

Greg laughs and shakes his head. “Whatever you say, dear,” he says teasingly before he looks over at Mike. “So, Mike, are you going to our gallery opening on Wednesday?”

Mike blinks, confused. “Excuse me?”

Greg frowns. “Did you not get the invite?”

Will lets out another snort. “Hon, did you use Facebook to send the invite?” Will asks, smiling teasingly.

“Yeah, why?”

Will barks out a laugh. “There’s where you went wrong. Mike doesn’t use Facebook.”

Greg’s still frowning and the expression only gets more pronounced. “But, you have a Facebook account,” Greg says, looking over at Mike.

Mike blushes and shrugs. “Yeah, but I never check it. Honestly, I forget I even have it most of the time.” It’s true, he’s a horrible Millennial. He got Facebook primarily for the Messenger App, but once he got a phone plan that had unlimited texts, he switched primarily to texting. God, he doesn’t even know how long it’s been since he last updated his profile picture, never mind scrolled through his Facebook feed. Practically all of his interactions with Facebook these days are with the author account for DL Williams, where he sometimes responds to comments and does some of his own promotion. Otherwise, his primary social media interactions are Twitter and Tumblr, where he just follows people and doesn’t really interact.

“You really need to get with the times, Mike,” Megan says, teasing. “At least get an Instagram account, or something. That’s where we share a lot of our stuff.”

Mike grins. “You mean like Dustin’s gross fetish?”

Megan laughs. “Hey, don’t judge him too hard. He just finds dancers’ feet fascinating.”

“It’s not a foot fetish!” Dustin yells back over his shoulder.

“You keep telling yourself that, honey!” Megan yells back.

Mike shakes his head, laughing. “God, I *really* don’t want to know any more than I already do.”

“Anyway,” Greg says, “So, Wednesday? Gallery opening? You able to go?”

Mike almost says yes and then he remembers – *El* – and he cringes. “Um, only if you’re ok with me being late.”

“Why, what’s going on?” Will asks.

Mike can’t help the way he blushes and wishes he didn’t act this way at the thought of spending time alone with El in a few days. “I got roped into planning the winter dance again this year.”

“Ha! You have to plan a school dance,” Dustin says as he plops down next to Megan, reaching over for the beer he’s half way through.

“That sucks, man,” Lucas says as he grabs his own beer. “Can’t you just, like, not do it?”

Mike sighs. “That wouldn’t be fair to my partner,” he says. “I’m meeting her after school on Wednesday to talk about what goes into planning since it’s her first time doing this.”

“Ooh,” Dustin teases. “A woman? Is she hot?” He pauses, gasping. “Wait, tell me this is the same teacher woman your students were asking about.” Mike feels his face flush even deeper and Dustin guffaws. “Oh my god, it is!”

Will grins, all impish and mischievous. “Mike, do you have a crush on this woman? You have to tell us who she is. Do you want us to put in a good word with her for you?”

“No, no, I do *not*,” Mike says, face so warm he’s scared he’s going to

be permanently burned. “See, this is why I don’t tell you shitheads anything about the people I work with. You keep prying and I’m not subjecting my coworkers to any of your nonsense.”

Lucas scoffs even though he’s grinning like a fool. “Please, like we couldn’t look them up on the internet.”

Mike grins at the small victory about to come his way. “And, tell me, what school do I work for again?”

The hushed silence that comes over the rest of the Party lasts for several moments before Megan pipes up. “Ooh, it’s a Catholic school, right?”

Mike laughs. “Well, that narrows it down to about 15 schools in the greater Chicago area – good job, though,” he says and gives her a thumbs up.

Megan hits him, palm smacking against his shoulder. “Ass,” she says, even though she’s smiling.

“Anyway,” Mike says. “I do *not* have a crush on my coworker, but I *am* working with her on this stupid school dance, so please stop teasing me about this.” He knows asking for them to stop teasing him is an exercise in futility but, dammit, he has to try.

Also, he doesn’t have a crush on El, he just *doesn’t*.

(He mostly succeeds in convincing himself...mostly.)

El’s Saturday is just the kind of Saturday she loves: filled with all of her favorite things.

She has a 3 hour long dance rehearsal in the morning, where she spends part of the time working through the choreography for the routine she’s planning for the Halloween recital (god, she’s so excited for that – yeah, sure, the music and costume might be a bit of an obscure reference, but she’ll make it work and surely there’ll be *some*

sci-fi nerds in the audience, right?).

The rest of the time is spent preparing for “The Nutcracker”, where she’ll be playing the Sugar Plum Fairy. It’s been *years* since she’s played the role, but her body still remembers the flow of the steps, so she concentrates mainly on getting to know Robert, who’ll be playing her Prince for the Grand Pas de Deux in Act II. He’s a nice man, a few inches taller than her, former dancer for the Chicago Ballet Company, and muscular in all the ways male ballet dancers are.

“It’s an honor to be dancing with you,” he says during a break – they’ve just finished their first go ‘round of blocking out the routine. “I saw you perform as Aurora in ‘Sleeping Beauty’ in London a few years ago. The Rose Adagio was, just...I *cried*,” he says with a sigh. “Just the most beautiful combination of artistry and skill I’ve ever seen.”

El blushes as she sips from her water bottle. “Robert, you’re embarrassing me,” she says with a giggle. “Hands down, though, the hardest role I’ve ever played. I don’t think my toes have ever been the same since.”

“Yeah, god, I swear you were en pointe the *entire* time,” Robert says with a smile.

“I think I was,” El says. Thinking about this makes her realize that her toes hurt – those few months she took off between graduation and starting back up weakened her calluses and she’s had blisters the past several days, even though her toe shoes are just the way she always likes them. *Gonna need to tape them up when I get home*, she thinks as she and Robert get back to dancing.

And, sure enough, when El gets home, she spends several minutes cleaning her feet and wrapping her blisters in medical tape. She looks down at the damage and she has to cringe, even as she’s reaching for her phone. Her feet are *not* pretty, not by a long shot. Years of dancing en pointe have curled her toes down and the knuckles of her toes are larger than most, strengthened and hardened over the years. Luckily, she’s never had any serious injuries and she’s always had excellent bone strength. But even still. And, with building her calluses back up? Yeah, her feet look *fantastic*, taped up and red

skinned and swollen and *gross*.

So, of course, she takes a picture and posts it to her Instagram account – “Just another day in the life of a ballerina’s feet! #gargoylefeet #balletlife #ohgoditshideous!”

El hasn’t always had the best relationship with social media. She pretty much missed the Facebook bandwagon since that really took off while she was focusing on working her way up through the ranks at the ABT in her late teens and early 20s. And when she became principal dancer, she had a professional Facebook account which was essentially a fan page. It was never really *her* page, though. That was the Facebook page of Jane Hopper, professional ballerina.

But Instagram? That’s El Hopper, through and through. It’s where she shares pictures and videos of her life, along with the occasional live stream (though she hasn’t done that since she stopped dancing full time). It’s mostly for her friends and family, though the majority of her followers are fans.

And it’s mostly those fans who comment on her photos, though not as many as before (it’s amazing how many followers you lose when you’re no longer a professional dancer). After El posts the photos, she finishes her post-rehearsal routine – taking a soaking bath, getting something to eat – and, later, she checks her notifications and sees that several people have liked or commented on her photo.

El grins as she reads through the comments, everything from “Glad to see you’re dancing again!” from fans to “Why do you have to show me this? Are you ok?” from friends and family to “Oh god, this is disgusting...*I love it.*”

That last comment, from the ever-so-familiar nougat_lover315, makes El smile even as she rolls her eyes. *Of course he commented on this picture.* She has a handful of followers like this (though he’s more prolific with the comments than most), people who follow her because of the disgusting photos of her feet post-practice, so it’s not *that* unusual of a comment and, hey, she doesn’t judge how people interact with her feed...*much.* So, she replies, “You, sir, have the *weirdest foot fetish.*”

(He later replies with “IT’S NOT A FETISH!” which makes El burst out laughing for a good, solid minute. God bless the internet.)

El has a quiet afternoon, just puttering around the house, doing some light chores while she watches an episode of “Sherlock”, and then before she knows it, it’s just before 4 – time to meet Max for margaritas and Mexican food.

It’s a nice enough afternoon, so El walks the 3 blocks from her place to the restaurant. Her toes complain a bit and her muscles are sore from practice, but it feels good to be outside. El knows once the temperatures really start to turn towards winter chill territory, she’s going to miss these moments, so she wants to get them while she still can.

Max is already at the restaurant when El gets there and El spots her immediately at one of the patio tables, next to a heater that’s ready to be turned on just in case, with a pitcher of margaritas already on the table. Max smiles when she sees El, her lips pulling upward in a broad grin, her red hair shining brightly beneath the late afternoon sun.

“Ellie!” Max exclaims, standing to greet her.

“MadMax!” El wraps her arms around her best friend in a tight hug like it’s been *forever* since they last saw each other, even though she just saw her a few days ago. El’s still not used to living so close to Max and being able to hug her like this on a regular basis and, until she does, she’s gonna keep hugging Max like this. Just because she *can*.

“Oh god, I’m never getting rid of that nickname, am I?” Max asks as they separate and sit down.

“Hey, you were the one with the George Miller obsession in 5th grade and *insisted* on writing ‘MadMax’ down for your name *everywhere*,” El points out, grinning at the memory. Max had fallen in love with anything and everything George Miller and started signing her homework as “MadMax Mayfield”. The nickname had stuck ever since and El never let Max forget it. In fact, she went out of her way to visit Max when “Fury Road” came out in theaters just so she could

tease Max about the nickname (also, the movie was *fucking* awesome, so, bonus).

“Yeah, yeah,” Max says, rolling her eyes and huffing a sigh of annoyance, but El can tell Max is amused and happy from the sparkle in her eyes and the way the corners of her lips twitch upward with the smile she’s trying to suppress. “Anyway, let’s get you margarita-ed up.” Max pours El a margarita in a salt-rimmed glass and, after a quick clinking of the glasses with a muttered “cheers”, El takes a long sip of the tequila and lime concoction and sighs. “Good, right?” Max asks.

“Incredibly,” El says with a sigh. “And absolutely necessary if I’m going to sit through another Marvel movie.”

Max snorts out a chuckle. “You know, with as big of a sci-fi nerd as you are, I would think you’d be all over comic book movies.”

El lets out a whine of annoyance. “I would be if there weren’t so many of them and it seems to be required to see *all* of them before seeing the newest one. I used to spend 9 months out of the year traveling. Not exactly conducive to being able to keep on top of a 20-plus long movie series.”

“Well, you’re in one spot now,” Max says with a shrug. “It’s time for you to catch up. Besides, you know you think Chris Hemsworth is *ridiculously* hot, so it’s not like you’re going to be suffering the *entire* time.”

El smiles and lets out an appreciative sigh “I do think he’s hot, you’re right.”

Max and El talk – chit-chat, really, as they flit from topic to topic – pausing only to give their order to the waiter and when their food comes out so they can enjoy the first few bites while it’s still hot.

“So,” Max says around a mouthful of fajitas, “How was the rest of your week? Want to kill anyone after your staff meeting?”

El giggles and takes the last sip of margarita out of her glass, her second of the night. “No, it was fine. I volunteered to help supervise

the students plan the winter dance they put on each year.”

Max smiles after she swallows her bite of food. “Aww, that’s nice of you. Sounds like it could be fun, planning a dance.”

“You’d think,” El says with a snort and an eye roll. “But my partner was assigned to work with me by the principal and, given how he described it when I talked to him about it after we got paired up, it’s not the world’s most exciting assignment.”

Max smirks. “Ooh, a *male* partner? Is he cute?”

The question brings to mind the memory of the Trio asking her if she thought Mike was the hottest teacher. “Oh god, not you, too,” El groans before she can stop herself. And then she realizes what she said *and* who she’s talking to. Because if there’s anything Max loves more than wheedling embarrassing stories out of El, she hasn’t found it yet.

Max lets out a gasp before she laughs. “Jane Eleanor Hopper, what haven’t you told me?”

Yikes, full name usage. Well, now there’s no way El’s going to be able to get out of saying anything, so she might as well come clean. “The teacher I’m working with, he’s...well, god, I don’t know how to put this.”

Max smirks. “What, he’s a total beefcake?”

The idea of “beefcake” and “Mike Wheeler” in the same thought is so absurd to El because Mike Wheeler is the *furthest* from beefcake possible, it’s not even funny. “No, god no. I mean, don’t get me wrong, he’s cute – *really* cute, actually – but I would *never* use the word beefcake to describe him.”

“Ah, the lanky kind, then,” Max says.

“Lanky and tall,” El says. “He’s definitely over 6 feet tall.”

“Ooh, tall,” Max says with a waggle of her eyebrows. “Tall ones are fun.”

El blushes fiercely at the suggestion in Max's voice. "Max," she chides, feeling almost scandalized. "He's my coworker!"

"Doesn't necessarily mean you can't take him for a test drive," Max says, grinning. "Hey, you were the one who said he was really cute."

Dammit, she did. And, *dammit*, he is. Mike Wheeler is really cute and El kind of hates that she can't stop thinking about it – from the curve of his smile to the breadth of his shoulders to the way his wrists taper into his palms to the freckles splashed across his cheeks. That still doesn't mean she's going to *do* anything about the fact that she's noticed all of these things. "Max," El says with a whine. "I'm not going to, and I quote, 'take him for a test drive'." God, even saying those words makes the blush on her cheeks deepen until her face feels like it's going to catch on fire.

Max laughs. "Oh, god, you're all hot and bothered, aren't you?" Max leans over and places her hand on top of El's, the look on her face filled with over-the-top sympathy. "Ellie, honey, how long has it been since you've gotten laid?"

El glares at Max and yanks her hand away. "Ok, we're not going there. I am *not* answering that question."

Three years, her brain whispers, the traitor.

Oh, who asked you? El shoots back.

"Fine, fine," Max says. "But you still haven't answered my original question about what you haven't told me. Sounds like I'm not the only one teasing you about this cute teacher of yours."

El huffs another sigh and crosses her arms over her chest almost defensively. "A few of my students were asking me a few days ago which teacher was the hottest and they were *seriously* pressing me to answer that Mike was – that's the teacher I'm working with, by the way. I just...I don't know what they were getting at."

Max shrugs. "Maybe they ship you two together."

El blinks at the unfamiliar usage of the word, said so casually from Max's lips that El thinks she should understand, even though she has

no clue. “Excuse me? ‘Ship’?”

“Yeah, like, they want you two to get together? Like, you know how people write fanfiction for their favorite TV show characters and make websites devoted to them? Like that. Except with real people.”

El feels her eyebrows inch up towards her hairline. “God, I really don’t want to know where you spend your time when you surf the internet, you nerd.”

Max jabs a finger in El’s direction. “Hey, fanfic is a legitimate art form and I won’t hear you denigrate it.”

El snickers. “Ok, if you say so.” She pauses, sighing, and worried her lower lip between her teeth. “But my students can’t *possibly* want me and Mike to...you know, get together...right?”

“They’re high schoolers,” Max says. “Who even knows anymore?” Max shakes her head and lets out a sigh. “Look, I’m sure it’s harmless. Just ignore them if it bothers you that much. If they realize their efforts aren’t yielding anything, they’ll stop eventually.” She grins suddenly. “Still, you think he’s cute, so clearly they’re getting *somewhere*.”

“I hate you,” El says with a glare. “Why do I tell you anything?”

“Because I’m your best friend and you actually love me?” Max says as she splits the rest of the margarita pitcher between the two of them. “Anyway, you should totally hop on that if you think he’s cute.”

Max says the words as El’s taking a sip of her margarita and she inhales sharply, spluttering. “Max!” she says through a cough.

Max just smiles and looks not at all sorry. “What? You should,” she says, waggling her eyebrows *again*.

El buries her face in her hands and groans. “Ok, that’s it. We aren’t friends anymore.” God, she’s not going to be able to *look* at Mike ever again – not without thinking of this conversation, at any rate.

“Oh, please,” Max says with a snort as she nudges El’s shin with her toe. “You’ll never be rid of me and you know it. I have too much dirt

on you, Hopper.”

“Well, right back atcha, Mayfield,” El says, moving her hands away so she can stick her tongue out.

“Oh, real mature, El,” Max says even though she’s laughing.

“Well, if I’m stuck with you, then you’re stuck with me back. So, there,” El says, punctuating her winning argument with a hearty gulp of margarita.

Max laughs and, gratefully, moves on to the next topic of conversation – “God, I need to tell you about this *utter* douche canoe who came in for a consult yesterday.” – and El is eager for something else to talk about.

But, the entire time, even when they leave the restaurant and go see the movie – which is better than El was expecting, given how many of previous ones she hasn’t seen – she can’t stop thinking about Mike, about how cute he is or how she’s going to have to work with him for the next couple of months and be in the same room as him. God, she doesn’t even have a *crush* on him and he’s already getting her all flustered. She can’t imagine what it would be like if she *did*.

Good thing El’s good at keeping her feelings in check, though. Because she’s *not* falling for a fellow teacher.

She just isn’t and that’s *that*.

So, yeah, too bad *that’s a lie*.

Granted, El buys her own damn lie for *three whole days*. Three days of passing Mike Wheeler in the hall and running into him in the teacher’s lounge and spying on him teaching on her way to and from the bathroom – three days of letting herself *believe* she’s not slowly falling for him, that she’s not developing the worst crush on him known to man.

It's too easy, really – mostly because El really doesn't see that much of him over those few days. Mike has his own classes to teach and El spends a lot of time in her office, keeping herself available for the students who seem to just stream in non-stop, one after the other.

So, El doesn't have to look too closely at the lie she's telling herself until Wednesday afternoon when she's scheduled to meet with Mike. And then everything goes pear-shaped.

It's a quiet day, too. There's no major drama that passes through her open office door – the students who come and see her that day are mostly filled with questions about small, everyday kinds of things, like "how should I choose my classes for next year?" and "do you have any advice on how to tell someone I want to be their friend?". And El lets herself get drawn into just *helping* people, so much so that she can ignore the strange butterflies that have taken up residence in her stomach whenever she thinks about meeting privately with Mike after school.

She's not scared to be in the same room as him – she's *not* – but there's a corner of her mind that *cannot stop* thinking about how pretty his freckles are or how soft his lips look, how it might feel to kiss those lips or have his hands touch her and hold her and she blames Max *so fucking much* for putting these thoughts in her head.

It's only her sheer determination to keep everything 100% professional that lets her cast those thoughts to the back of her mind where she can pretend like they're not even happening, where she can pretend like those butterflies are just a figment of her imagination.

And so she continues ignoring those butterflies once school is out for the day and she's walking down the hall from her office to his classroom. She notices her palms are a bit sweaty and her heart is beating a little too fast, but El chalks it up to excitement. Yes, she's *eager* to help the students plan their Winter Ball, that's it – no more, no less. She never went to any school dances when she was in high school, but they always seemed so *special* and she wants to do whatever it takes to give these kids a special night.

(in hindsight, it'll be amusing how much she believes the lies she tells

herself.)

The halls are mostly empty as El makes her way out of her office and down the hall towards Mike's classroom. Her black, slingback heels echo in the all-but-empty hallway with each step across the tile, a high-pitched staccato heralding her path. Her steps slow as she reaches the open doorway to Mike's classroom and she peers in, leaning so that she can just see inside without fully standing in the doorway.

And, suddenly, it feels like she can't breathe.

The light from the late afternoon sun is streaming in through the tall windows, upper panes open to let the warm afternoon air in. Only a third of the overhead fluorescent lights are on, their light too weak to overpower the sunlight that streams in, instead amplifying the natural light in a way that makes everything seem a bit ethereal.

But El's not paying too much attention to light or the windows. No, most of her attention is focused on the man standing up by the chalkboard.

At first, Mike has his back to her as he works up at the chalkboard, drawing what looks like complicated chemical compound diagrams with slightly crooked, looping handwriting. A solid beam of sunlight slants against his back, illuminating the eggshell white of his dress shirt, gently rumpled after a long day of teaching and moving around, looking so soft to the touch, El wants to press her cheek against it just to know for sure.

Mike lifts a hand to brush his hair away from his forehead, his hair gone a little wild and wavy from the humidity at the end of the day and El imagines running her hands through the thick, black locks, curling her fingers around the strands, scraping her nails against his scalp. Even worse, the movement of Mike's hand draws El's gaze to his bare forearms, shirtsleeves long since rolled up. She can't help but admire the strength in the exposed limbs, all smooth skin and lean muscle that only emphasize the length of his forearms and El *desperately* wants trace the exposed skin with her fingers.

And then Mike pauses in his writing and turns to look down at the

notes spread out on the lab table he uses as his desk, the look on his face one of soft concentration – brow gently furrowed, lips pursed, his gaze focused and intent – and it makes El's heart skip a beat. It's disarming and incredibly attractive and El can't help but wonder what it must be like to be looked at like that by Mike Wheeler, to be looked at like nothing else matters.

Oh shit, no, no, stop. Stop this right now.

El's heart is suddenly pounding way too hard and she takes in a deep breath to steady herself before she reaches inside for the calm she always wraps herself in before a performance – serene, cool... composed. And it's only once she feels like she has a handle on herself that El feels brave enough to stand fully in the doorway and rap her knuckles against the doorjamb to get his attention.

Mike's head whips up at the sound and, for a moment, the look on his face is a startled one – mouth hanging open, eyes wide. But then he registers that she's there and he smiles, all warm and welcoming. "El, hi!" he says, voice bright and a little raspy from a full day of teaching...and it's oh so shiver inducing.

Calm, I am calm, I am cool.

It's a total sham – she's just about the furthest from calm and cool she's ever been. El can't stop the way her heart skips a beat at the smile on his face or the way she shivers at the sound of his voice and she realizes, with a stomach that's sinking even as it fills with butterflies, that she has a *crush* on Mike Wheeler. God, this is so inappropriate (seriously, who gets a crush on their coworker?) and it's going to make things *so difficult*, but El also knows from past experiences that there's no reasoning with her heart on this one.

It's just a crush, she tries to tell herself to quiet the flurry of emotion inside of her. You've had crushes before. This'll fade like they always do once you get to know him.

The thought is enough to give El a measure of control and, feeling sufficiently composed, she smiles back. "Hi, Mike, hope I'm not interrupting."

It's only been a handful of days since Mike accepted the fact that he's attracted to El Hopper. But accepting that fact doesn't help soften the impact any whenever he sees her.

He looks up at the knock at his classroom door and, for a moment, Mike forgets what oxygen is. El's standing there in the doorway to his classroom, looking like the most beautiful woman he's ever seen. She's wearing this soft, teal wrap dress that clings tightly from shoulder to hip before flaring out gently to flow softly around her thighs, the ties that hold her dress closed knotted just above her right hip. She's wearing black heels that add a few inches to her diminutive height and her hair is half pulled up, the rest of her curls flowing freely down her shoulders like a lush waterfall of honey brown strands. A light flush colors her cheeks, the expression on her face uncertain and soft, and her full lips are just barely parted, like she's about to speak and the words are stuck.

Jesus, how's he supposed to be in the same room as this woman and *not* be distracted?

Still he manages to smile and greet her, hoping that he doesn't look and sound like a total mouthbreather. But then she smiles back and the way her face lights up threatens to make his heart burst from his chest, all sparkling eyes and dimpled cheeks. "Hi, Mike, hope I'm not interrupting," she says, her voice light and a little breathy.

It takes a moment too long for Mike to regain his breath, but he manages to get himself under some semblance of control and he shakes his head. "No, you're not interrupting, we're supposed to be meeting now. I'm just..." Mike trails off to look over his shoulder at the basic chemical compounds he's drawn on the board. "Preparing for lecture tomorrow," he finishes. "Easier to draw when I'm not rushed."

"It's nice," El says. "I mean, I have no idea what you're drawing on the board, but it's nice that you take the time to prepare." El steps into the classroom and looks around, eyes taking everything in. "God,

it's been years since I've been in a chem lab," she says, voice hushed with memory.

"College?" Mike guesses as he puts the chalk down and steps around to the other side of his lab desk.

El refocuses her attention on him and grins. "Even further back. High school. Never took chem lab in college. Wasn't required for my degree."

Mike squints, thinking. "Psychology, right?"

The happy surprise that blossoms across El's face makes Mike so glad he was listening and remembered enough from when she introduced herself all those weeks ago. "Developmental psychology, yeah. You remembered!"

Mike can't stop the blush that heats up his face. "Yeah, well, guidance counselor, not too far of a leap for me to guess if I couldn't remember."

El's grin softens to a gentle smile and she shrugs one shoulder in a move that Mike could almost describe as coy. "Still, it's nice to know *someone* was listening when I introduced myself."

Mike lets out a laugh. "You don't strike me as the type of person anyone could easily ignore," he says, mouth racing ahead of his brain, and he has to suppress the groan that threatens to bubble up from his throat. Ok, could he be more obvious right now?

Still, El doesn't look at him like she wants to run screaming from the room or is even remotely offended. Instead, she arches her eyebrow and smiles playfully. "Is that so, Mr. Wheeler? Pray tell, what do you mean by that?"

Mike finds himself grinning back. "Just that you're a woman who commands attention, Ms. Hopper," he says, playing right back, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the lab table. God, *what* has gotten into him? "Must be that stage presence from all that performing."

El laughs and the sound makes his heart soar, his soul sing, and every

inch of his skin light up with tingling energy. “Has anyone ever told you you’re quite the charmer?”

At that, Mike snorts. “*That’s* a first. Usually, I just run my mouth off and people run away.”

“Hmm, people must not have a sense of humor, then,” El says, giggling a bit, shaking her head with amusement before she sobers up a bit. “Anyway, so, the reason I’m here.”

“Right, sorry, got distracted by your sparkling conversation,” Mike says, unable to keep from chuckling. “C’mon, grab a stool and I’ll walk you through it.”

El practically *glides* over to one of the lab stools near the front of the class and, as Mike moves to sit next to her, he watches as she slides up onto the stool, making it look way easier and more alluring than should be possible. And then she crosses one leg daintily over the other and Mike almost has a heart attack at the smooth, effortless grace of the motion and the way it shifts the skirt of her dress, exposing the skin right above her knees. “Right, lay it on me.”

Mike gulps, both at the way her legs look *and* the innuendo that’s working its way through his brain, unbidden and *so very distracting*. But, he sits down next to her and gives her what he hopes is a calm, collected smile. “Right, ok, the annual Winter Ball....”

For the next 10 minutes, Mike explains to El the process the St. Ignatius student government members go through to plan the Winter Ball, from the dance committee meetings to the fundraisers to the setup at whatever location they manage to reserve. As faculty supervisors, Mike and El will be responsible to attend all the meetings, help keep track and safeguard the funds the students raise, help supervise the setup and tear down of the dance, *and* act as head chaperones.

Once Mike’s finished, El blinks a bit. “Wow, that’s....” She trails off, pausing, and Mike just waits for her to finish. “A lot,” El says after a bit. She bites her lip, looking anxious and uncertain and Mike’s heart thumps painfully in his chest as the intense desire to comfort her sweeps through him.

"Hey, no, it's not that bad," Mike says. "Really, the kids keep track of a lot of the moving pieces. We're just there to make sure they don't screw up and run out of money. Trust me, they're a responsible bunch who *know* the weight that's on their shoulders. It'll be fine. There's nothing you can do to mess up here."

El's still looking at him like she's not quite sure if she believes him. "Promise?"

Mike's heart gives another squeeze. "Promise," he says, reaching out to place his hand over the one resting on the table they're sitting next to. Her skin is soft beneath his palm and all of Mike's nerve endings seem to rush to where he's touching her, every inch of his hand tingling with dizzying warmth. But she seems to draw some sort of comfort from the gesture, so it's worth the way he's once again rapidly forgetting how to breathe at the feel of her hand beneath his.

"Ok," she says, letting out a breath that gently puffs out her cheeks. "Ok, good. I just want everything to be perfect for them, you know?"

The look in her eyes is so earnest and he marvels at just how much she cares...and how much that fact affects him in turn. "It will be, trust me," he says, his voice soft and soothing. "And I'll be with you every step of the way, ok?"

El nods as she takes in a deep breath, her shoulders relaxing. "Yeah, ok. Thanks, that makes me feel better."

Mike smiles. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," she says, voice almost hushed. "You're good at this, you know."

"Good at what?"

El gives another shrug of one shoulder. "At comforting people, helping people. I can see why your students really like you." She's smiling softly, mesmerizingly.

Mike lets out a deprecating laugh. "They just like me because I let them play with chemicals and blow things up."

El shakes her head. “No, I’ve seen you teach, Mike. You really care about your students and they feed off of it.” She gives him a shy smile. “Besides, a fair number of them have told me you’re their favorite. You make science fun for them. Honestly, it’s amazing. Your students are lucky to have you. You’re a fantastic teacher.”

For a moment, Mike really can’t breathe. It’s hands down one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to him and he feels just blown away. “Thanks,” he says, voice croaking a bit with emotion. “Um, wow, that’s, uh....”

El giggles and shakes her head. “Sorry, didn’t mean to lay that all on you.”

Mike lets out a soft laugh. “No, it’s ok. Just wasn’t ready to get complimented today, that’s all.” In general, Mike’s not used to receiving compliments. And coming from El? It’s the most amazing feeling in the universe.

Mike meets her eye and, there’s a moment where time seems to slow to a crawl. She’s staring back at him, the look in her golden brown eyes soft and earnest and *open*, so open it almost threatens to overwhelm him. He wonders what she sees when she looks at him, wonders if she feels any of the same regard his students seem to feel for him. Moreover, he *wants* her to think so highly of him, to feel like she’s lucky to have him, to know him.

And then they both blink and the moment ends, time resuming its usual, steady march. “Right,” El says, sighing. “I should let you get back to preparing for your classes tomorrow. Thanks for meeting with me.”

“Oh, no problem, any time,” Mike says. He looks down, noticing that his hand is still covering hers, and he blushes. “Uh, sorry, I...sorry,” he says as he hurries to take his hand away.

El smiles, cheeks flushing a bit. “Don’t be,” she says as she slips off the stool. “It was nice.” She takes a couple steps backwards, arms held loosely at her side. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Mike tries not to focus on the feeling of loss that echoes through him

now that he's no longer touching her. "Oh, uh, yeah, right, tomorrow."

El giggles and waves. "Night, Mike."

"Night, El," he says, feeling like something foundational has shifted beneath his feet. He watches as El spins on her toes and heads out of his classroom, pausing at the door to give him a small smile over her shoulder before she disappears out of his sight, leaving him with the sound of her retreating footsteps as she walks down the hall and away from him.

For a very long moment, all Mike can do is *sit*, feeling like his world has been knocked 5 degrees off its axis – still spinning, but not the same. Because now Mike can no longer ignore the fact that he has a crush on the beautiful, vivacious, sweet, *kind* El Hopper.

And he's *so* screwed.

It's a week until the first dance committee meeting, a week of El being unable to stop noticing *everything* about Mike whenever she sees him – his laugh, the way he shakes his head to toss his hair out of his eyes, the easy stride of his walk, the sound of his voice as he teaches, all confident and authoritative, yet playful and kind. She can't stop thinking about the way he touched her, his hand laid comfortingly over hers, his palm warm and gentle, his touch sending tingles up her arm that are still nestled in her heart. And she especially can't stop remembering the way he smiled at her and eased her through her nervous worry, the soft way he spoke to her, or the way his eyes locked on hers, rich and deep and full of emotions she couldn't even begin to put a name to.

So, it's no wonder she's a nervous wreck when the first dance committee meeting takes place. She finds herself standing in the front of a classroom next to Mike, the student government members spread out in front of them – El can see the Trio looking at her and Mike and the conspiratorial smiles on their faces do *nothing* to quell the nerves

in El's stomach. It just adds to the feelings swirling inside of her – hyperawareness of Mike standing so close to her, fear of letting the students down, worry that she's going to mess up somehow.

Like he can sense the maelstrom of her emotions, Mike turns to give her a soft smile, one that, despite the butterflies that surge and squeeze around her heart, manages to help ease some of the tangled emotions inside of her. It's a quiet moment, despite the din of the students talking around them, and El's grateful for Mike's steady presence. She marvels, once again, just how kind and considerate he is, how *thoughtful*. It's touching, really, and so rare, to meet a man who's so nice.

And then he *winks* at her. El *knows* he's trying to be reassuring, but the gesture is so rakish, so *hot*, it sends her heartbeat skyrocketing in her chest and she feels almost faint. Warmth pools heavy beneath her skin, coursing through her veins, and she's filled with the overwhelming urge to kiss him and *never stop*.

She's so lost in the feelings that are bubbling up inside of her that she almost misses it when Mike turns back to the students in front of them and starts talking, taking the lead as he calls the meeting to order. El is *incredibly* grateful because she doesn't know if she could speak right now (god, she just hopes everything she's feeling isn't written across every inch of her face).

Because it's hitting her, right in this moment, that she's actually *the worst* at keeping her feelings in check. Because this isn't just a silly crush.

Because, heaven help her, she can no longer ignore the fact that she is falling for Mike Wheeler, this man she barely knows but wants to *so badly*.

And she has *no* idea what she's going to do about it.

Notes for the Chapter:

And we have established that they have crushes on each other! Progress!! (And Dustin's fetish is explained, *you're welcome*)

Hopefully it won't take me too long to come out with the next chapter, but I'm going to DC for a long weekend (Thursday - Tuesday) and I don't know how much time I'm gonna have to write, but I'll give it my all, you guys. Don't be surprised if chapter 3 doesn't come until late next week, though.

3. I Think I'm Falling In Love

Notes for the Chapter:

Haha, so, two and a half weeks later and here we are! Sorry for the lengthy gap. I was on vacation and then I got sick (I still haven't gotten rid of this horrible cough that came with my summer cold, fml). But, I've done it! Here we are on chapter 3 and it's a doozy! So I hope you enjoy!!

It's amazing just how quickly having a crush on El becomes a part of who Mike is - like his feelings, such as they are, are now a fundamental part of his identity.

Mike Wheeler: 28 years old; born April 10th, 1989 in Hawkins, Indiana; Physics/Chemistry teacher; published author; and undeniably falling for El Hopper.

And he just falls *harder* the more he gets to know her, the more he learns.

It's not bad, though, falling like this, not at all – there's a certain exhilaration in the way his heart pounds when he sees her, in the way his skin tingles and his breathing picks up, in the way he feels like he can do anything whenever she smiles at him or laughs at something he says.

God, he barely knows her and he's already a goner. Just how far down the rabbit hole is this going to go? And how long is he going to be able to hide it?

He's somehow managed to hide this from the Party so far – though that hasn't stopped Dustin from teasing him about his "hot teacher woman" – and, so far, they haven't even noticed something different about him (like how distracted he is all the time now, or how he randomly smiles when he starts thinking about El without warning).

Mike knows it's only a matter of time, though, until they *do* find out. Because this thing is only getting worse as the days go by and Mike is

notorious for wearing his heart on his sleeve. And when they confront him – and they *will*, no ifs involved – Mike will have no choice but to come clean because he's a horrible actor and, well, *friends don't lie*.

None of this is helped by the fact that El is just so open, so willing to share who she is with others. El reveals herself to him in bits and pieces and, even though Mike hasn't been able to spend that much time with her, it's amazing just how much he's learned about her in two short weeks (and is it wishful thinking on his part to think that she seems to be more open, more willing to talk about herself with him than with the rest of their coworkers? God, he hopes not.).

Really, it's how little time he gets to spend with her that's the most frustrating part, especially because she seems to enjoy their conversations as much as he does. But, outside of that meeting in his classroom the week before the dance committee's first meeting, Mike and El are rarely in the same room together and, when they are, they're almost never alone. They spend an hour a week in dance committee meetings in a room with the entire St. Ignatius student government and, other than that, Mike only sees El in 5-10 minute chunks – passing each other in the hallways at school, running into each other in the teacher's lounge, walking out to their cars together after the end of the school day.

Still, Mike treasures every minute he gets to spend in El's company, even though it never feels like enough. Worse, every minute he spends with her makes him crave more, especially as he starts to get to know her, to learn about her.

He learns, for example, while both of them are waiting to use the microwave in the teacher's lounge one day during lunch, that her favorite food is toaster waffles (Eggos, to be specific) because her dad used to buy them for her when she was a kid, but she could rarely indulge in them when she was still dancing professionally.

Or, he overhears her saying when he passes by her open office door as she chats with a student, that she wanted to be an astronaut when she was 5, but changed her mind when she learned that she wouldn't be able to bring her pet goldfish up into space. ("Mr. Freckles was my best friend and I didn't want to be separated from him.")

Or, when he notices that she seems to have a different travel mug every day when they run into each other on their way from the parking lot. That day's mug is a pretty turquoise, pale pink, and grey mug in a geometric pattern (the day before's was a simple black one with the oh so distracting slogan "Dancers do it with their whole bodies" in blocky white text), and when he asks about her varied mugs, she tells him that she started collecting them when she used to travel a lot and kept forgetting them when she was on the road and, even when she *did* start remembering them, she just kept finding new ones she liked.

It's stuff like this that Mike discovers – the little, everyday things – and he hoards each new piece of knowledge even as he craves the next one. Because Mike's quickly discovering that she's perfect – not objectively (because no one is), but perfect for *him*. El is sweet and funny and giving and Mike can so easily see himself falling in love with her.

Then he discovers that she's something of a badass and kind of a nerd and Mike knows his fate is sealed.

And it starts, oddly enough, with a fight on school grounds.

Bryce Anders and Garrett Westin have been athletic rivals since freshman year and it finally comes to a head in their senior year when Garrett is chosen as captain of the lacrosse team over Bryce. No one's really sure how the fight actually starts, just that one second everything's fine and, the next, Bryce and Garrett are at each other's throats.

Mike just so happens to have the good fortune to be walking past the cafeteria when the fight turns physical. He's tall enough to see over the throng of students gathered, so he's able to see Bryce throw the first punch to the shocked gasps and shouts of the other students surrounding them.

Oh shit, Mike thinks before he finds himself rushing into the cafeteria and pushing through the crowd, even though he has *no* idea how he's going to break up a fight between two 18-year olds who each have at least 20 pounds on him, all of it muscle.

"Alright, make room, everyone!" Mike shouts as he pushes students aside. But, to his frustration, barely anyone registers the sound of his voice, like he might as not even be there and, suddenly, Mike's having really unfortunate flashbacks to his own high school experience. *You can take the boy out of high school*, a corner of Mike's mind thinks with a sad sigh. The only students who even seem to notice him are the ones he pushes past, with the rest of them fully paying attention to the fight and Mike struggles to make his way through the mass of high school students.

He's almost there, with just a few more students in front of him, when a voice calls out, a voice that is increasingly familiar as the days go by. "Hey, break it up!" It's El, her voice loud and authoritative, ringing clearly throughout the cafeteria. The noise almost immediately dies down and, by the time Mike's managed to push his way through to the center of the crowd where Bryce and Garrett are, everything and everyone is hushed except for the two boys, who are still fighting.

For a moment, all Mike can see, though, is El. She's standing there, dressed simply in a pair of fitted, charcoal grey slacks and a white blouse, hair pulled up in an artfully messy ponytail – it's the kind of effortless simplicity that makes Mike think El has *no* idea how beautiful she really is. But, for once, it's not her beauty that's taking his breath away...or, at least, not *entirely*.

El is standing there, only a couple of yards away, looking like a fucking warrior princess – feet planted firmly on the ground, shoulders squared, head high, arms held loosely at her side, but every inch of her ready to *move*, to react. And the look on her face – god, the look on her face – full of unyielding determination and righteous intent, flush high on her cheeks...heaven help him if it's not the *sexiest* thing he's ever seen, her standing here like this, completely fearless and take-charge and confident.

And then El moves and time slows to a crawl. Mike watches as El pushes herself in between the two fighting boys, not even a second of hesitation, hands reaching out to separate them. Mike's heart leaps into his throat at the sight of El stepping between two students, each of them at least twice her size, and she does it without even *flinching*.

Mike marvels at her bravery.

Garrett immediately steps back at the intrusion, blinking like he's waking up out of a fog as El pushes him back. He looks down at El and horror dawns on his face, causing him to pale beneath the fading summer tan and the blood that drips down from his nose and a cut above his eyebrow. It's the face of a kid who knows he's about to get suspended...or worse. Mike would feel sorry for Garrett, except he's *18 fucking years old* and should know better by now.

But Bryce is still caught up in the heat of the fight. When El steps between him and Garrett, Bryce is mid-punch, arm just pulling back to rear forward and hit Garrett in the stomach, fingers of his other hand wrapped around Garrett's blood-specked white polo shirt. He twists when El pushes him back, momentum changing, body re-aligning so that his punch is aimed square at where El's shoulder is.

Mike knows, in the split-second of thought that flashes through his brain, even if Bryce *wants* to stop what about to happen, there's no way. And Mike doesn't know if El is fast enough or far enough away to get clear in time.

It's this thought that has Mike moving before he's even aware. He all but lunges forward, using the speed he's built up from running and swimming, and hooks a hand in the crook of Bryce's elbow.

Mike's hand at Bryce's elbow yanks him back, interrupting Bryce's momentum *and* his balance. Bryce whips around, fury in his eyes...only to come eye-to-eye with Mike. Mike can see it in Bryce's eyes the moment when the young man realizes who he's looking at and what it means. "Oh, fuck," Bryce says, cheeks going ruddy with embarrassed fear.

Mike shifts his hand so he's gripping Bryce's arm and he feels his blood race with tight anger. "Principal's office. Now."

"Both of you," El says, tacking on to Mike's words, her voice icy and steely – *commanding* – and Mike can't help the way he shivers a bit at it, despite what's happening right now. God, he needs to get himself under control. This is *not* the time.

Suddenly, both Bryce and Garrett are talking over each other in their rush to explain, their words blending together – *Ms. Hopper. We're sorry. We got carried away. It was his fault. No, it was his fault.* – and El holds up a hand. “Save it for Mr. Russell. Let’s go. Now.” She gives Garrett a leading push, prompting him to start walking, and Mike follows, hand still wrapped around Bryce’s arm until the other kid also moves.

The crowd parts for the four of them to walk out of the cafeteria, and a stony silence surrounds them as they make their way through the halls. Mike looks over at both Bryce and Garrett as they walk – both boys’ faces are bloody and rapidly darkening with bruises. One of Bryce’s eyes is swelling shut and blood is *still* pouring from Garrett’s nose. *Probably going to need a trip to the nurse’s office soon*, Mike thinks. But, first, Mr. Russell’s office.

El leads them into the front office and she approaches Janet Weiss, the receptionist. The older woman, black and silver hair pinned neatly in a bun, frowns as she looks up at the foursome. “Looks like someone got into a fight,” she says grimly.

“Is Mr. Russell available?” El asks, taking the lead.

Janet stands. “I’ll go check. Be right back.”

“Thank you,” El says as Janet walks away. Then she turns to look at both Bryce and Garrett, hands on her hips, lips set in a stern, frowning line. “I can’t believe you two,” El says, voice low. “I am so disappointed. You two are *seniors*. You’re supposed to be role models for the lowerclassmen. And instead you’re fighting over a sports team?”

“Sorry, Ms. Hopper,” both boys say in unison, sounding sad and downcast, and Mike almost cringes. Yeah, he’d feel like that too if El was giving him the full weight of her disappointment.

El opens her mouth to say something, but is interrupted as Mr. Russell and Janet come out his office. Mr. Russell points at Bryce and Garrett with a sharp finger. “You two, in my office, *now*.” He looks at Mike and El. “Mr. Wheeler, Ms. Hopper, if you wouldn’t mind waiting out here so I can get your report in a few minutes. Janet, go

grab Shelly, make sure she brings the first aid kid.”

“Right away, Mr. Russell,” Janet says before she rushes off. Mr. Russell disappears into his office with Bryce and Garrett in tow, door shutting behind them with ominous quiet.

And then it’s just Mike and El in the front office. Off in the distance, Mike can hear the sounds of the occasional student walking by the front office or talking down the hall, but he’s mostly focused on El. Her cheeks are still flushed, the look in her eyes still hard and fiery, but her shoulders are relaxing as the adrenaline slowly seeps from her. Mike can feel the same thing happening to him, too, in the way his skin prickles and his limbs feel like they’ve taken on extra dead weight.

Still, he’s concerned, even as he’s in awe of her. “You ok?” he asks. “Thought Bryce Anders was going to hit you there, for a second.”

El looks up at him, lips pursing for a moment, before she smiles, soft and grateful. “Yeah, I’m ok. Thanks, though, for stopping him. I probably could have gotten out of the way in time, but...” she trails off, shrugging. “It’s nice knowing someone is looking out for me.”

Mike smiles, feeling himself swell with pride – god, it’s nice being a pretty girl’s savior for once – even as he’s shaking his head. “Somehow, you seem like the type who can look after yourself just fine,” Mike says as, wordlessly, they both move to sit down in the chairs by the front desk, both of them sitting so that they’re turned towards each other.

El’s smile turns into a grin. “Benefits of having a cop for a dad. Self-defense classes.”

Mike inhales so quickly at the statement, said with such aplomb, that he coughs as he chokes a bit on his own saliva. A reflexive wave of fear ripples down his spine and Mike shudders a bit. “Your dad’s a cop?”

El suppresses a giggle. “Why, you have less than pure intentions, Mr. Wheeler?” she teases, eyes sparkling.

Mike blushes – he can't help it because, *yeah, he kind of does* – but he scowls. “Very funny, Hopper.”

At that, El lets her laughter escape her and, for a brief moment, Mike lets himself live in the sound, joyous and buoyant and *happy*, before he sighs and looks over at the closed door to Mr. Russell's office. “Wonder how bad it's going in there.”

“Pretty bad, I'd imagine,” El says.

“You ever get called into the principal's office?” Mike asks, knocking his knee against hers as he looks back at her, leaning in conspiratorially.

El rolls her eyes, her smile wry. “Didn't I just mention my dad is a cop? You think I'd be here if I *had*?” she asks back, teasing.

Mike breathes out a laugh. “Fair point.” He pauses, gulping. “So, your dad must be pretty scary, huh?”

“That's what all my friends tell me,” El says with a wistful sigh. “And my high school boyfriends. I don't personally see it – I mean, he's just my dad, you know? – but, yeah, I can understand it. My dad's a big guy and he can be loud and I think he forgets that sometimes. He never did any of that stupid dad stuff, like cleaning his service weapon whenever I had a boy over or anything, but he still scared them anyway.”

Mike shudders. “I'd have been scared, too, to be honest.”

“Having flashbacks to your high school girlfriends' scary dads?” El asks, smiling gently, head cocked with curiosity.

“Never had a high school girlfriend. Didn't date until I got to college.” Mike blushes, feeling embarrassed, and he looks away for a second. “Pretty lame, I know.”

El shrugs, shaking her head. “No, it's not lame,” El says. “There's no checklist that everyone has to follow for life. Things happen when they happen. I have friends who have *still* never dated and there's nothing wrong with that.”

El says those words with such sincerity that Mike can't help but believe her and he shakes his head, marveling at her. "You're something else, El Hopper."

El grins, cheeks dimpling, teasing. "I know."

For a moment, Mike almost thinks El's making a Star Wars reference, but he rids himself of that notion real quick. *Women who look like this don't watch Star Wars, you know this.* Still, it's a nice thought, but in Mike's experience, beautiful and nerdy don't go together.

As Mike watches, El glances over at the door, lips quirking. "So, how many times do you think Mr. Russell's head's spun around?" Mike feels his brow furrow and, when he doesn't respond, El looks over at him. "What, never seen 'The Exorcist'?"

Mike grimaces. "Scary movies aren't really my thing." He pauses, nose wrinkling. "Head spinning?"

El clucks her tongue and sighs, giving him a look. "Oh, come on, you *had* to have heard the reference. It's, like, on the level of 'use the Force, Luke', or 'Resistance is Futile', or Stan Lee's cameos in all those stupid Marvel movies."

Mike's jaw drops for a just a moment – holy shit, she *was* making a Star Wars reference earlier, she *had* to be – before he recovers and arches his eyebrows. "Stupid Marvel movies?" he echoes, trying to sound offended, but coming off mostly amused.

El lets out a tired groan and lets her head fall back. "Ok, they're not *stupid* – I mean, they're no 'Alien', or anything – but there's so *many*, and I missed a good chunk of them when I was travelling a lot, so I'm not up to speed on the whole franchise."

Mike smiles, feeling giddy. "Is 'Alien' your favorite movie, I take it?"

El perks up and nods enthusiastically. "Oh, definitely. I mean, really, I'm just a sucker for good sci-fi, but sci-fi thrillers are where it's at for me. And Ellen Ripley is so badass. Though, 'Pacific Rim' is my *other* favorite movie, so...." She trails off, shrugging. "Who can say?"

Mike almost guffaws, unable to believe what he's hearing. "Wait, *you*

like sci-fi?"

"What, girls can't like science fiction?" El asks, one eyebrow arched primly.

Mike chuckles, incredulity spreading through him as it feels like his heart is about to burst from his chest. God, how is she so *perfect*? "Not that they *can't*, just that they really don't in my experience."

"Hmm, maybe you just haven't met the right kind of woman, yet," El says and there's *something* in her voice that has Mike's heart picking up its pace. He stares at her, drawn in by the sparkle in her eye, the teasing curve of her smile, the light flush that splashes across her cheeks, and he just can't believe that she's *real*, that this beautiful woman – who loves sci-fi and makes nerdy references – is talking to him, smiling at him, *teasing* him, possibly even flirting with him if he's reading her right (and god, he hopes he is).

And yet, despite the way that his heart skips a beat and his stomach feels like it's filled with thousands of nervous butterflies, Mike grins. "Oh, I don't know, seems like I already managed to meet one."

The flush on El's cheeks deepens just in time for Mr. Russell's door to open and the way Mike's body fills with warmth in response brings with it a thought that rings through him like a clarion bell.

Mike Wheeler is 100% falling for El Hopper.

And he's so *fucked*.

It's like once El admits to herself that she's falling for Mike, all bets are off and the floodgates open and, suddenly, he's almost *all* she can think about. Even when she's actively thinking about something else, there's still the constant undercurrent *Mike Mike Mike* that dances through the back of her mind, like a steady heartbeat nestled deep inside of her. Mike's practically the first thing on her mind when she wakes up in the morning, the last thought before she goes to bed, and

every day she's at work, El *swears* she can physically feel the distance separating them.

It's thrilling and exhilarating...and so *very* distracting. El feels like a lovesick teenager again, obsessing over her first crush (Sam Nigel in the 8th grade – he had the prettiest floppy brown hair and gorgeous green eyes and El *couldn't* stop thinking about him. Needless to say, Max teased her *mercilessly*.)

Only, the difference here is that El isn't 13 – she's 28 with a job and responsibilities and a *life* outside of daydreaming about some guy.

And yet.

El can't bring herself to regret the feelings that just build more and more every day. Mike is like *no one* she's ever met before, and so different from the men she's usually attracted to – shorter, usually other dancers, more muscular, artistic, romantic...flaky and untethered and always caught up in the moment. El's heart has been burned more times than she cares to count.

Mike wouldn't do that to her, El *knows*. Mike's sweet and funny and so smart. He makes her laugh like no one else ever has, full of humor and quips that get her with how clever they are. He's tall – *really* tall – and lean and nerdy and so, so pretty.

El's heart just *races* whenever she sees him and she can't get enough of looking at him. She loves the splash of freckles that lay across his cheeks and nose like constellations of stars in the night sky. The sight of his smile, from the gentle upturn of the corners of his mouth in quiet conversation to the wide, toothy grin that cuts across his face whenever he's amused, makes El's stomach swoop like she's just gone off the drop of the world's tallest rollercoaster. And the way he licks his lips when he's nervous – an adorable gesture if El ever saw one – just draws her attention to how soft and full his lips are...and how much she wants to kiss him.

(it catches el off guard, the way her body reacts to the thought of being kissed by mike. lips tingling, burning, itching to feel his on hers, heart pounding, skin too tight, breath stolen from her lungs. she craves, desires in a way she never has before, to touch her lips to his and never ever

stop.)

The line of his shoulders, broad and strong, with arms long and lean and graceful, takes her breath away. El marvels at his height, with legs that stretch up and up, and she feels *tiny* next to him in a way she so rarely feels in her life. She wonders what it would be like to have to lean up to kiss him, how far he would have to bend down, how he would lean over her so that she would have to arch her back to keep her lips pressed to his, cocooned by the curve of his body as he hovers over her.

But, above all, what never fails to draw El's attention are Mike's hands, all large, broad palms and long, graceful fingers, skin warm and slightly calloused, hands big enough to engulf her own entirely, but so, *so* gentle. She thinks a lot about that first time he touched her, his hand resting on top of hers, of its warmth and the way his fingers curled around her palm *just* so, and wants to feel that again, to have his fingers wrap around her, the weight of his touch on her skin.

El spies on him teaching, watching as he writes up on the chalkboard, thin piece of chalk held delicately between his fingers; or she watches as he brushes his hair out of his eyes or articulately gestures as he talks. And she *wants*, wants to feel those hands on her, wants to feel what it would be like to be held by him, to be touched by him. God, she *dreams* about it, dreams that make her blush, that speed up the beating of her heart...dreams that make her sigh with gentle longing and quiet yearning.

El doesn't think she's ever been more physically attracted to a man in her entire life.

And, *god*, she almost wishes it was just physical. Because it would so much easier to get over, to ignore, to work around.

But it's so much more than that. Because Mike is one of the best people she's ever met. A fantastic teacher, a gracious colleague, smart and funny, considerate and adorable and practically perfect.

(yes, she's seen hints of a heated temper, a response to stress and worry, but it's always over in a flash and born from exasperation rather than true anger. still, the way his eyes flash makes her heart skip a beat when she

(sees the heat that rises in them and she wonders what it would be like to push and tease him past his breaking point.)

And everything that El learns about Mike just has her falling harder. Falling into *what*, she's not sure at first. In the early stages, everything is just infatuation and intense physical attraction.

But then they flirt (or, rather, she *thinks* they're flirting) while they talk about her love of sci-fi movies – him surprised that a *girl* likes sci-fi, her enjoying the surprised pleasure on his face – and when she teases him about not having met the right kind of woman and he fires back with that he seems to have managed to do so, so very clearly talking about her, the way her whole being just *blossoms* with affection makes her feel like she could just float away.

It's this moment where El realizes that she could seriously fall in love with Mike, that he looks at her and sees a woman worth meeting, worth *knowing*.

But it's not until the 3rd week of October where El realizes that "could fall in love" has turned into "*is* falling in love".

And it's all because of a transfer student.

Victoria Pullman starts as a junior at St. Ignatius a full month and a half into the school year and has a *really* hard time settling in. She's a diminutive girl with short blonde hair, thin shoulders, and a tendency to hunch over on herself, like she's trying to shield herself from the outside world...and El's heart just goes out to her.

El meets Victoria on her first day – part of El's job is to meet with transfer students to help orient them and act as a resource for whatever they need to adjust to a new school – and El fears the young girl's going to have a hard time fitting in. At already 6 weeks into the school year, friendships have been formed, groups set, and there is little room for a shy newcomer in the established social order.

Still, El wants to help. "So, how do you like St. Ignatius so far?" It's just after lunch on Victoria's first day and Victoria has a free period, so she's in El's office as part of her orientation.

Victoria shrugs and reaches up to finger a lock of her hair. “It’s ok, I guess,” she says, quiet and downcast.

“I’m sure it’s a lot different from your old school,” El says. “Your file says you moved here from Florida. How was the move? Are you settling in to your new house alright?”

Again, Victoria shrugs. “Yeah, mostly unpacked,” she says, still quiet. “My dad’s not home a lot, so it’s just me and my mom.”

El gives the girl a gentle smile. “Does your dad work a lot?”

Victoria nods. “It’s why we moved here, for his job. But, I-” She cuts off quickly, looking down at her lap, and El can see the girl is fighting to hold back her emotions.

Probably didn’t want to move at all, El thinks. And she can’t blame the young girl one bit. El remembers what it was like to change schools, to move houses, to start over. And, yeah, it got better over time – she adjusted and made new friends with people she’s still friends with to this day – but it was still hard in the beginning and El wishes she knew the words that would make Victoria believe. But, as El knows, there are no words; time is the only remedy.

So, El keeps an eye out for Victoria over the next few weeks, even as she gets caught up in her feelings for Mike. It’s not hard to. Victoria often sits on her own, either in the cafeteria or outside on benches beneath the covered walkways or just in the hallways, knees folded primly or legs outstretched, showing scuffed Mary-Janes and white knee-socks, and El starts to worry that she doesn’t see the new girl making any friends.

It’s halfway through October, a few weeks after Victoria starts at St. Ignatius, when a knock at El’s office door pulls her away from her computer. El looks over to see a young student, a girl. El recognizes the face, but can’t put a name to it (it’s not surprising, there are 350 students and El’s only been working at St. Ignatius for a little over two months). “Hi, can I help you?” El asks, making sure to smile welcomingly.

The girl looks a little startled, even though she was the one who came

to El and not the other way around, and El figures she might be a little nervous. “Hi, uh, Ms. Hopper? I’m, um, Natalie, Natalie Grey, and I, uh...”

El stands and walks over to the small girl, who’s probably no older than a sophomore (though looks can be deceiving). “Hey, Natalie, it’s ok. What did you want to tell me?”

“Um, the new girl, Vicky? She’s, uh, out by the bleachers by the soccer field. Mr. Wheeler told me to come and get you? Said you’d be able to help.”

El’s heart leaps into her throat – *Mike* – but she smiles and gives Natalie a grateful squeeze on the shoulder. “Thank you for coming to get me, Natalie. You can go back to class.”

“Oh, it’s no problem. I have a free,” Natalie says.

El gives Natalie one last smile before she heads away from her office and out towards the soccer field, feet swiftly carrying her. She’s out in the cool autumn air within moments and El takes a moment to appreciate the grounds. Located in one of the more affluent neighborhoods surrounding Chicago, St. Ignatius’ grounds can most aptly be described as “elegantly sprawling”. From the white stucco buildings and red, shingled roofs, to the tree covered walking paths and the wide, open lawns, St. Ignatius just *oozes* serenity and knowledge. The soccer pitch is located in the back corner of the campus near the small church they hold mass in and El winds her way down the paved walking paths, trees shading her overhead.

The ground turns from paved to dirt to grass beneath her feet and El’s glad she decided to wear low-heeled boots. The grass, still a bit damp from an early afternoon rain, squelches and squeaks beneath the soles of her shoes and El makes sure to slow her steps, to harness the balance she’s built over the years to keep her legs beneath her.

The bleachers are on the far side of the soccer field and it’s only as El approaches that she’s able to see the two figures crouched behind the flimsy, aluminum seats. Their forms are mostly shrouded by metal support struts, but El can easily recognize Mike’s messy head of hair and the sweep of his shoulders. And sitting right next to him is who

El can only assume is Victoria.

They're sitting at the end of the bleachers, leaning near the struts at the corner, and, as El circles around to approach them, she hears the sounds of someone crying - *Victoria*. Immediately, El slows, not wanting to startle a girl who's clearly in distress. And, a few moments later, once El's close enough, she's able to hear something else: Mike talking in low, gentle tones.

"Hey, it's ok. It's going to be ok," Mike says and El pauses, hanging back, not wanting to interrupt. She wraps a hand around a metal beam on the underside of the bleachers, feeling the damp coolness seeping into her skin.

"No, no it's not," Victoria says through her tears. "Everyone *hates* me."

"Ok, that's just not true," Mike says. "I don't hate you."

Victoria lets out a scoff. "You don't count. *You're* a teacher. You have to like me." El almost laughs, but only manages to hold it back at the sheer misery in Victoria's voice.

"Alright, fair point," Mike says with a small laugh, the sound more deprecating than anything else.

"Why did this have to happen?" Victoria asks. "I was *happy* with my friends at my old school. Why couldn't my dad find a new job at *home*?"

"I know, I know, it sucks," Mike says. There's a long pause and, just as El has come to the conclusion that this is the perfect moment for her to announce her presence, Mike speaks up again. And the sound of his voice, sad and vulnerable and almost *small*, freezes El in place. "My dad had to move right before I started high school," Mike says and the words are spoken with pain that has long scabbed over, but it still hurts El to hear nonetheless.

"...Yeah?" Victoria says, soft, inquisitive...*hopeful*.

"Yeah," Mike says after a beat. "He got a promotion and we had to move to the city, like, a month before I was supposed to start high

school with my best friends. It sucked, it sucked really badly. All I wanted to do was to be with my best friends again and I couldn't." A gasp sticks in the back of El's throat and her heart gives a painful thump in her chest. God, she can just picture it: Mike, 13, maybe 14 years old, probably 6-8 inches shorter, thinner, smaller, wandering the halls of a generic high school, all alone in a sea of people. El can picture it all too well and it almost makes her want to cry as her heart goes out to him.

"What did you do? Did you make friends?"

Mike lets out a huffed breath, something that could either be a sigh or a small laugh. "Yeah, eventually. I mean, they weren't my friends from back home, but I still think of them as friends."

"What about your best friends? What happened?"

"They're still my best friends," Mike says and the warmth in Mike's voice just makes El's heart feel like it's about to sprout wings and fly away, it's beating so frantically. "We moved to Chicago to go to college and we've been living close to each other since."

"They must have really cared, if they kept in touch," Victoria says, her voice trailing back down into misery.

"It wasn't easy," Mike says. "But we texted and hung out online, like video games and IM and stuff."

Victoria scoffs. "It's so much easier for boys," she huffs. "I never play video games with my friends."

"Well, you can Facetime, right?" Mike says. "And there are group texts you can set up for your old friends. It worked because my friends and I made it a priority, because we cared enough to push through the hard times."

El can see Victoria give a half-hearted shrug. "I guess I could call or text my old friends after school," she says. "But that doesn't help me *here*."

"Well, there are clubs and stuff you could join. It's what I did, and-

It's at this point that El decides she's hung back and eavesdropped long enough. So, while Mike is mid-sentence, El rounds the corner and sticks her head out. "Hey, someone told me you were out here," she says, announcing her presence.

Both Mike and Victoria look over at the sound of El's voice and Mike smiles while Victoria blushes a bit. "Ms. Hopper, we—"

"Look like you were in serious discussion," El finishes.

"I asked Ms. Hopper to come out here," Mike says, meeting El's eyes before he looks back at Victoria, who's looking up at him. "She can probably help you better than I can."

"No, that's not true," Victoria says. "You helped a lot."

"Yeah, he's good like that," El says, smiling, stomach doing a giddy little flip at the way Mike blushes, and she goes over to stand in front of them. "Mind if I sit?"

Victoria's brow furrows. "But, the ground's wet."

El shrugs. "It's just water. It'll dry," she says as she gently sits, legs folding beneath her with all the smooth, easy grace of the ballerina she grew up being. The grass beneath is damp and the moisture soaks through the thin fabric of the slacks she's wearing, but it's nothing to worry about and El's more worried about the tear-stained cheeks on Victoria's face. "So, what's wrong, sweetie? Everything ok?" she asks as she looks up at Victoria.

Victoria looks uncertain and glances over at Mike, who give her a small nod. "You can tell her. Ms. Hopper is *great* at helping. She'll know what to do." El's heart does another funny flip in her chest, a skipping of several beats, as something in Victoria's face relaxes and she turns back to El, nodding.

Over the next several minutes, El gets the whole story, including the parts she already overheard. Victoria hasn't been able to make *any* friends, she feels like everyone's ostracizing her, like there's no where she belongs, and she misses her old friends, her old school, her old life.

El commiserates all the while, making appropriate noises that are 100% heartfelt and genuine as Victoria pours her heart out again. And, when she's done, El reaches out and places a hand on Victoria's arm. "I know how you feel," she says softly. "I moved schools after middle school and it took me a while to make friends again. Do you want to know what worked for me?"

Victoria raises an eyebrow with the level of skepticism that only a 16-year old can summon. "What?"

"I joined dance club," El says. "I was already a dancer, but it gave me somewhere to meet other kids outside of class." El pauses, smiling. "Say, that's an idea. Why don't you come by dance class tomorrow?"

Victoria frowns. "But, I don't dance."

El shrugs, looking over at Mike to give him a quick conspiratorial smile and, for a moment, she almost forgets her name. Mike's looking at her with such depth of emotion that El struggles to take in her next breath as she almost loses herself in the way he's looking at her, all warm and soft and awed and she *never* wants him to stop looking at her like this. But she recovers quickly and looks at Victoria, even as her heart is racing in her chest. "Anyone can learn to dance," El says emphatically. "Besides, it'll give you somewhere to meet some of the other girls in your year. And don't worry about not being registered. Just be there at 3:00, ok? And bring clothes you can move around in. If you don't like it after one session, you don't have to come back. But just try it. What do you say?"

There's a long moment where Victoria just looks at her, unsure, face flat and guarded. But then she gives El a small smile and nods. "Yeah, ok, I can do that."

El feels tendrils of warmth unfurl in her chest, she's so happy and relieved. "Ok, good. You're going to love it, though, I just know it."

Mike nudges Victoria. "We should get you back to class. What do you have this block?"

Victoria makes a face. "Comparative Religion," she says, frowning.

"I'll write you a note, explaining why you're late," El says as she moves to get up.

"Here, let me help you," Mike says as he starts to stand from the cross-beam he was sitting on, his hand outstretched. El looks up at him, their gazes meeting, and, *again*, it feels like time slows to a crawl as it always does when she looks at him. El's struck, once again, just how sweet and nice and *gentlemanly* Mike is. The way he offers his hand to her, a reflexive action without thought or hesitation, just because he saw that he could help somehow, speaks to the gentle kindness she knows is inherent to who Mike Wheeler is (the way he stayed to help Victoria is evidence enough of that). A small smile pulls up the corner of El's lips at being on the receiving end of that kindness and she reaches up to take the hand offered.

Mike's hand wraps around hers and El can't help the way she gasps just a little as the simple touch sends a cascade of tingles rippling up her arm, her veins filling with a warmth that bubbles inside of her and swells in her heart. She finds herself biting her lip, the only way she can resist the urge to let her tongue dart out to wet them, and she doesn't miss *at all* the way Mike's gaze drops to her mouth at the motion, eyes darkening just noticeably. Suddenly, she feels dizzy in a way that makes her glad she's still partially seated and El wants to surge to her feet and capture his mouth with hers, to deepen the dark hunger that lingers on the edges of Mike's gaze, and never *ever* stop.

El resists all those urges, though, and lets Mike pull her up (even though she really doesn't need the help – she learned long ago as a dancer how to stand up from sitting on the ground without needing her hands). His hand grips hers tightly as he guides her up, pulling her up with an ease that speaks to a strength hidden in the lean muscles of his body.

(el tries not to think about what else that strength could do and it takes everything she has to keep a straight face, to not blush at the thought.)

Then she's on her feet and Mike lets go of her hand, the loss of his touch immediately ringing hollowly in her chest, which El ignores as the three of them make their way back to the main building, Victoria walking between them. Before she knows it, they're at her office so El can write Victoria a note excusing her lateness.

"Here you go," she says, passing the small slip over. "Remember, tomorrow at 3:00 in the Arts building. The dance studio is on the side by the parking lot. I'll see you there, yeah?"

Victoria gives El a small smile and nods, her blonde hair shifting just a bit at the motion, causing her to reach up to tuck it behind her ears. "Yeah, Ms. Hopper. I'll be there. Thanks." She looks over at Mike. "And thank you, too, Mr. Wheeler."

"No problem," Mike says. "I'll see you in Chem, bright and early tomorrow morning."

Victoria pulls a face. "Ugh, don't remind me," she says and gives El and Mike a small wave before turning and heading off to class.

Then it's just Mike and El standing in her office, just the two of them. *Alone*. Sure, the door's open, but *still*.

Gulping and trying to tamp down her nervousness, El looks over at Mike and smiles. "Thanks for sending someone to come and get me," she says. "But, from the sounds of it, you had it handled pretty well. I was listening for a couple of minutes before I poked my head around the corner."

A soft blush spreads across Mike's cheeks and he ducks his head, which only emphasizes the line of his jaw and neck. He shrugs, meeting her eye. "Thanks, but, not like you. It took me 20 minutes to get her to tell me what she told you practically immediately. You're good with the students, you know?"

El's heart flutters at the compliment and she tries not to giggle in response. "It's my job," she says. "And I'm a trained psychologist."

Mike lets out a soft hum in assent, nodding a bit. "Yeah, makes sense." There's a pause and El gets the sense Mike's searching for something to say so as not to end their conversation. "So, was that true? About you moving before starting high school?"

El nods, grinning. "Yeah, looks like you and I have more in common than we thought, huh?"

Mike chuckles. "Seems like it." He grimaces. "It sucked, didn't it?"

“Yeah,” El sighs. “It sucked *a lot*. I had to move away from my best friend and start over again and I *hated* it. It didn’t help that my parents had just gotten divorced and my mom was dealing with some pretty bad health issues. It was just...a bad time all around.”

Mike gives El a soft, heartwarming smile. “Well, you seem to have made it through alright.”

El returns the smile. “You, too.” She lets out a laugh. “It helps that I had dancing as a touchstone, something I could focus on. Plus, my best friend and I talked on the phone *all the time*.”

“You two still friends?” Mike asks, honest curiosity in his voice, looking over at her with a questioning gaze.

El can’t help but giggle this time. “Yeah, we are. She lives in Chicago, actually, so it’s like you and your friends: finally living in the same city together.”

Mike grins. “Yeah, it’s great, isn’t it? Being so close to friends?”

El smiles as she thinks about Max, about getting to see her and hang out with her on regular basis and it makes her feel so warm inside, so full of love, she hardly knows what to do with all the feelings inside of her. “It’s the best, really.”

Mike gives her a long look before he breathes out a laugh, smiling all the while. “Well, I should probably go, prep for my next class. I’ll see you, though, at the dance committee meeting in a couple of hours.”

“Yeah, see you then,” El says with a nod, unable to tamp down her smile.

Mike seems to have the same problem, though, and he’s still smiling as he gives her one last look before heading out of her office. El watches him go, mesmerized by the sight – the easy grace of his steps, the length of his legs, the way he runs his fingers through his hair, all heart-poundingly attractive and so, so cute – and when he’s gone from her view, El has to give herself a quick shake to bring herself back to the present. “God, this is getting ridiculous,” she mutters to herself before she goes back to her desk and tries to

distract herself with work.

It's an exercise in futility, though. El spends the rest of the afternoon with thoughts of Mike running through her head, going over every word, every touch, every look from earlier, winding herself up into a frantic bundle of nerves. And by the time she's in the same room as him again for the dance committee meeting, El can't stop looking over at him, can't stop thinking about the feel of his hand around hers, the way he looked at her while she tried to help Victoria...the way her heart contracted at the thought of high-school aged Mike, sad and alone, and how she wished there was a way to go back in time to help him, to be there for him.

This is when El knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that this isn't some silly crush or sheer physical attraction. It's more, *so much more*. It's "I hurt when he hurts, I smile when he smiles" levels of emotion.

She glances over at him from where they're sitting in the back of the classroom – in front of them, the student council sits in a circle of desks, discussing location options and color themes – and she's unable to keep from looking at him, like she's a moth to his flame, his warmth filling her and untethering her from gravity.

The movement of her head draws Mike's attention and he looks over at her, one eyebrow raised questioningly with amusement dancing in his gaze. El's heart leaps into her throat and she can't help the blush that spreads across her cheeks as she shakes her head to try and downplay the glance, trying not to give herself away.

Yeah, she's 100% falling in love with him...and she has *no* idea what she's going to do about it.

Who do they think they're kidding, anyway?

It's almost sickening, the level of obliviousness on display. Can't they see they're *perfect* for each other?

God, they're just *standing* there, *flirting*, both smiling – him mischievously, her coyly – leaning into each other with secretive whispers and barely suppressed laughter.

God, enough already.

“Melanie, what are you staring at?”

“Would you look at that?” Melanie says in lieu of answering, gesturing to where Mr. Wheeler and Ms. Hopper are standing at the edges of the auditorium while the school waits for assembly to start.

Paula lets out a noise that is somewhere between a scoff and a sigh as she looks in the direction Melanie indicated. “Looks like Operation Matchmaker is working, though.”

“Not fast enough, though,” Melanie says. “We’re going to have to up our game, ladies.”

“What’s left for us to do besides lock them in a supply closet?” Caroline asks. “I mean, we talk about them to each other practically *all the time*. I don’t know what else we can do.”

As Melanie watches, Ms. Hopper lets out a laugh, clearly in response to something Mr. Wheeler said, and she leans in even closer, one delicate hand landing on Mr. Wheeler’s upper arm in one of the most flirtatious moves Melanie’s ever seen. Mr. Wheeler clearly likes Ms. Hopper touching him, because he smiles broadly, looking almost proud.

And, suddenly, Melanie knows what to do.

She finds herself smiling. “Ladies, I have an idea,” she says to both Paula and Caroline.

Some might think it weird, this desire Melanie has to create a match between Mr. Wheeler and Ms. Hopper. But it makes perfect sense to her. Mr. Wheeler is her favorite teacher. He’s nice and funny and always treats his students with respect, even the female students, which is especially important because he’s the science teacher and girls can have such a hard time getting recognition in science classes. Melanie wants him to be happy, since he does so much for her and

her fellow students.

And Ms. Hopper? Well she's just *awesome* – beautiful and amazing and so nice and sweet and a breath-taking dancer. She always has a moment for whenever Melanie needs help and Melanie knows that Ms. Hopper is *perfect* for Mr. Wheeler.

So this plan of hers just has to work. It just *has* to because failure is *not* an option. Not even close.

It feels like October has just flown by and, before Mike knows it, it's only a few days before Halloween. Fall reigns supreme over Chicago and the chill in the air that gets worse day by day, it seems, has Mike slowly adding more layers to his wardrobe.

And he *really* needs those layers tonight. It's past 5:30 and he's *just* leaving campus since Melanie Decatur had an urgent advising need and asked to meet with him after school. She's finalizing which universities she's going to be applying to and, since she wants to pursue a degree in biochem, she's full of questions and anxiety and worry about which school to choose and how to fill out her applications and what she might be overlooking. So Mike spends over an hour with her after school, answering her questions, trying to reassure her that she's going to be fine, that with her grades and extracurriculars and SAT scores, she'll be able to get into pretty much all the schools she's choosing to apply to.

The entire time, though, there's a niggling feeling in the back of his mind that most of what Melanie's asking him she already knows the answer to. Like she's glad for the advice and the confirmation, but that she's not as lost as she's coming across.

Mike's not sure what's going on with her, but he also has the feeling that she's planning something, something to do with him and El. And he can't for the life of him figure out what it is. Melanie and her little group are always talking to him about El and Mike's starting to lose count the number of times that Melanie, Paula, or Caroline "just so

happen” to bump into either him or El when they’re standing next to each other, causing him to crash into her or vice versa.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say they’re trying to set me and El up. But that’s ridiculous. Right?

Right?

Regardless, it’s weird and Mike doesn’t want to confront the girls about what they’re doing because he’s kind of afraid of the answers... and because, if they’re trying to set him and El up, there’s a part of him that’s starting to think it might be working. It feels like he and El can’t stop looking at each other, like their eyes are just drawn to each other whenever they’re in the same room. And, each time without fail, they’ll make their way to each other’s side, the air between them filling immediately with easy conversation and (Mike hopes) flirtatious smiles.

El’s also started touching him a lot. Not inappropriately – a hand on his arm, nudging him with her shoulder, hand pressed against his back if she needs to move past him. But each time that it happens, Mike feels his whole body light up, every nerve tingling, and it renders him almost breathless.

At the same time, Mike can’t seem to stop doing whatever he can to make her laugh and his brain is constantly racing to think up clever things to tell her, anything to pull that sparkling laughter out of her, to make her eyes light up, to cause her to bite her lip as she tries to hold back a smile. It’s those moments where Mike is filled with the most overwhelming urge to kiss her, where El’s lively and happy and beautiful and practically irresistible.

It fills his thoughts a lot, imagining what it’s like to kiss her, *wanting* to kiss her. It makes his heart feel too small for his chest, pushing the air out of his lungs until he’s practically breathless, his hands itching to cup her face or weave into her hair, his lips tingling with the need to press against hers.

God, it’s getting so bad the rest of the Party is seriously starting to “wonder what the fuck is wrong with him” (Dustin’s words, not Mike’s). It’s even affecting his writing – he’s trying to work through a

particularly tense, action-focused section of the book, but his growing feelings for El are infusing his writing with flowery, flowing language and a lack of urgency. Mike's not sure what to do about this new roadblock, but it's making progress go very slowly, which means that Kelly is on his ass even more than usual.

Maybe I should change up my writing playlist, make it a little moodier, a little edgier. Might help get me in the right mood.

This is the thought running through Mike's head – mentally going through his rolodex of inspiring music to figure out what songs to put on his new writing playlist – as he makes his way out to the parking lot in the dying light of the day, coat buttoned up all the way, messenger bag slung over one shoulder.

And it's as Mike's passing by the Arts building that he hears one of those songs. At first, Mike thinks he's hearing things as he stops just at the edge of the parking lot to listen more closely. But he's not and the faint sounds the "Battlestar Galactica" soundtrack reach his ears. In terms of writing music, Mike tends to favor cinematic scores to serve as inspiration and that soundtrack is always among his favorites. God, he can even *name* the song that he can just barely hear – "Violence and Variations" and, wow, is he the world's biggest nerd – and, before Mike is fully aware of the decision, he's heading off in search of the music's source, curiosity carrying him along.

It's not hard to find where the music's coming from – an outer door leading into one of the studio rooms is propped open – so the mystery becomes not *where* the music is coming from, but who's playing it. The song draws to a close as Mike approaches and there's about 15 seconds of silence while Mike continues making his way to the open door, figuring he's about to walk in on some nerdy art students or something.

Mike steps up to the open doorway just as another song is starting – the same one, actually, from the beginning – and he looks in, ready to announce his presence –

-And freezes at the sight that greets him.

At first, Mike's not entirely sure *what* he's seeing and it takes him an

embarrassing number of seconds to piece it together.

Sprawled out in front of him is the dance studio and, in the middle of the floor, facing a wall of mirrors, someone is dancing.

No, not just someone. *El*.

El is dancing and it's one of the most *amazing* things Mike's ever seen. God, "dancing" even isn't the right word for what he's seeing – too pedestrian, too *mundane*.

No, what Mike is seeing is magic, pure and simple, a master displaying her craft. And he is *spellbound*.

El moves with lithe grace and effortless fluidity, like she was born to do this. She twists and spins and leaps through the air, floating across the floor like gravity has no hold on her. Arms held aloft accentuate the musculature of her biceps and shoulders, skin left bare by the black leotard she's wearing, the fabric held in place by spaghetti-thin straps that cross between her shoulder blades. Her hands are never still – delicate and expressive, the back of her hand caressing her cheek, fingers clutching her upper arms, hands held outstretched, beseeching, *demanding*.

Mike watches her rise and fall, lifting herself onto her toes with an ease that makes him want to cringe, but he can't stop watching the way her calves flex or her ankles lock unwaveringly beneath the ribbons of her ballet shoes, can't help but notice the lean definition of her thighs as she pirouettes, soft skirt flaring with each spin, revealing the skin of her upper thighs. She bends and lifts, one leg stretching out or up towards the ceiling while she reaches down for the floor, hips twisting and swaying as she moves forward, torso twisting and emphasizing the curves outlined by the tightness of her leotard.

It's athletic and beautiful and mesmerizing and Mike never wants to look away.

And then there's the music, the story she seems to be telling, using the canvas of her body to deliver it. A story full of sadness and anger and then *hope*, a story of war, of loss, of what to do when there are

no other options and how to survive through to the other side. And if her body is the canvas, her face is the framing, full of emotion, wrapped up in the story she's telling. El is swept up in her own magic and it's the most alluring thing Mike's ever seen – cheeks flushed, lips parted and just smiling, every inch of her face rapturous and expressive and lost in the artistry she's weaving.

The song is a long one, almost 8 minutes, but it feels like it passes in the blink of an eye as Mike watches. When it crescendos, reaching the glorious end, El practically *flies* across the floor, spinning and leaping, the climactic end nearly taking his breath away.

And as the song finishes on a high, drawn out note, El strikes one last pose – one leg crossed behind the other with toes pointed to touch the ground, one arm held high above her head as she looks up at the ceiling. In the silence, Mike can hear her breathing, chest heaving as she races to suck air into her lungs, and Mike can't imagine the endurance necessary to do what she just did.

"Holy shit." The words, spilling from Mike's lips, catch both him *and* El off guard and Mike cringes as El gives a start, a small yelp escaping her.

Startled, El looks in the direction of the door, hand coming to press over her heart, surprise etched across her face. But then she notices him and confusion takes over instead. "Mike? What are you doing here?"

Unbidden, Mike takes a handful of steps into the studio, body operating on auto-pilot, and he feels shell-shocked and blown away by what he just watched. "I...needed to stay late, helping a student," he manages to get out, still feeling like the rug has been pulled out from beneath him. "But, you – I – *El...*"

Eager curiosity blossoms on El's face, her blush deepening and her lips pulling up in a questioning smile. "Yes?"

"That was *amazing*," Mike breathes out. "I mean, I knew you danced professionally, but I didn't know it was like *that*."

El grins as she turns away to head over to a small podium over in the

corner, Mike following like he's tethered to her. She places her feet more carefully, or just differently, due to the ballet shoes on her feet, and it changes the gait of her walk "Have you never been to the ballet before?" she asks as she reaches for a bottle of water.

Mike tries not to get distracted by the way her lips wrap around the mouth of the bottle or way her skin shifts and throat contracts as she drinks greedily and just barely manages to keep it together. "Um, no," he says, flushing a bit, both ashamed a bit at his answer – he's not an uncultured boor, he swears – and at how he can't stop staring at her. "Never had the opportunity."

"Hmm, well, we should fix that if you want to continue to be friends," El says, eyes sparkling with good humor.

"Well, when you put it *that* way," Mike says, grinning back as he stands only a couple of feet away. He glances down at her feet, still encased in her ballet shoes. "Doesn't that hurt?"

El arches an eyebrow. "Does what hurt?"

"Getting on your toes like that."

"It did when I was a kid," El says with a grin. "But you get used to it. Your feet are never the same, though. I have what my friends call 'gargoyle feet'."

Mike's intrigued and his head cocks as he considers the strange, pink satin shoes. "How does it work?"

"Well, the toes of the shoes – the box – are super hardened to make a supportive structure and, essentially, I stand on the tips of my toes in the shoes with the inside of the box support me." El smiles. "Like this." With Mike still looking at her feet, he's surprised by when she steps forward towards him and rolls up onto her toes, ankles shifting smoothly. And, when he looks up, he sees that she's gained several inches, her eyes only a handful of inches below his.

But it's the look on her face that captivates him: eyebrow arched, eyes sparkling with humor, lips stretched in a mischievous, flirty smile. Mike finds himself wanting to lean in. God, it would be so easy

to close the scant distance between them - she's so close, he can practically feel her breath on his face - and kiss her right now. But before he can think on it for more than a second, El spins around him, giggling as she teases him, and Mike turns to keep looking at her, echoing her giggle with a laugh of his own even as he's awed by the easy display of her skill.

He sobers, sighing in amazement. “You’re *really* good, aren’t you? Like, *amazingly* good.”

El blushes, but she’s shaking her head, bashfully amused as she lowers herself back down to her feet, hand reaching out to hold the bar that stretches along the mirror. “Well, they didn’t call me ‘America’s Sweetheart Ballerina’ for nothing, I suppose.”

“They did not,” Mike says, chortling.

El gestures to the pieces of paper she has taped up on the mirror around the podium – magazine covers and articles, playbooks, random pictures. “See for yourself.”

Turning, Mike steps closer and his eyes immediately land on one of the bigger items taped to the mirror – a magazine cover from a few years ago. On the cover is a figure Mike can just barely recognize as El. Thinner than she is now, El’s dressed in white satin and gold sparkles, tutu made of lace and tulle gently flaring out from her hips. She has her arms held in front of her, delicately curved, while she stands on her toes in front of a grey background, looking down at the ground, her face in profile, hair pulled back in a smooth bun. She looks demure, mysterious, and sweet all at the same time. “America’s Sweetheart Ballerina: Ballet’s Newest Star” the title article reads. “Jane Hopper on becoming the country’s premiere ballet star and how she found her success,” is the short blurb that follows.

“Holy shit,” Mike repeats as he starts to read the bits of the article that are taped next to it. “You were, like, famous.”

From behind him, El lets out a laugh. “In certain circles, yes.” El sighs, a tight exhalation of breath. “Hey, while you read, mind if I stretch?”

Mike's distracted by the article, words leaping up at him from the page – “small-town American girl”, “dancing through adversity”, “natural talent” – so he just murmurs in assent as he reads about what appears to be El's meteoric rise in the world of American ballet. Dancing since she was 5, getting accepted to the American Ballet Theatre when she was 18 and fresh out of high school, becoming principle dancer 4 years later...*holy shit*, his brain repeats.

His eyes slide away from the article to the other things taped on the mirror: a handful of playbooks – Giselle, Sleeping Beauty, Swan Lake, Don Quixote – from performance halls all across the globe. There are pictures of Paris, St. Petersburg, Sydney, Seoul, Tokyo, London, New York...and El's in all of them, posing for the camera, all smiles.

“Jesus Christ, you were the real thing, like one of the best in the world,” Mike breathes, just floored. El's so down-to-earth, so nice and sweet and completely the opposite of what he would assume a prima ballerina would be. How did she end up teaching at a small, no name school? “God, why would you give it up?”

“It's a lot of pressure,” El says from somewhere behind him, her voice sounding tight and strained. “Besides, I love helping kids.”

Mike starts to turn around. “But you got to travel to all those-” He cuts off mid-sentence as he finishes turning and spots El sitting on the floor.

When she said she was going to stretch, Mike had envisioned the kind of stretches he does at the gym: toe touches, quad stretches, etc.

Well, El's stretching all right. Just not in the way he pictured.

And *holy shit* is she flexible.

She's sitting on the floor, legs stretched out on either side of her in perfect splits, leaning over with one arm stretched over her head and reaching for the opposite foot. She holds the position for a long moment, exhaling audibly, before she sits back up...and immediately leans forward so that her upper body is flush with the floor, arms outstretched. She rotates her hips just enough so she can bend both of her knees, feet pointing away from her and-

Holy fuck.

Mike immediately has to look away and close his eyes, imagination bombarding him with suggestive image after suggestive image of just how that flexibility could be put to use and *jesus christ you are 28 years old, not 16, act like an adult and not a walking hormone.*

Still, Mike knows what he's going to be thinking about as he falls asleep later that evening and it feels like a really, *really* inconvenient time to realize that not only is he incredibly emotionally and physically attracted to El, he's also *very* sexually attracted to her as well. *No, this isn't awkward. Not at all, why do you ask?*

"Sorry, you were saying?" El asks, pulling Mike out of his mild existential crisis.

Mike draws in a deep breath and summons the wherewithal to open his eyes and look back at her. She's still in the same position (fortunately or unfortunately, *take your pick*) and Mike's speaking before he's even aware of what he's going to say. "That looks uncomfortable, the way you're stretching," he says, aware of how strangled his voice sounds, knowing he's probably giving *everything* away.

El pulls her arms in and props her upper body up on her elbows so she can look at him over her shoulder and *dammit stop looking so seductive*. To make matters worse, she's looking at him with one eyebrow arched playfully, *teasingly*. That's when Mike knows he's *definitely* broadcasting some of what he's thinking on his face and he blushes, looking away with embarrassment. "Helps with my turnout, keeps my hips open." The words are spoken with amused mischief and Mike can't help but roll his eyes.

Exasperation overrides everything else and Mike looks over at her with a flat look, trying not to smile as amusement creeps up on him. "Hey, this is a Catholic school. Enough with the innuendo."

El grins and moves, stretching her legs straight out behind her and clambering to her feet. "Aww, I thought that was funny," she says as she tosses her ponytail over her shoulder.

“Ha ha, then,” Mike deadpans, even though he’s full on smiling now.

“Hey, I was raised by a cop. I could make worse innuendos if you wanted,” El says, eyebrows wagging.

That pulls a real laugh out of Mike and he shakes his head. “You really are something else. I don’t think I’ve ever met a woman quite like you.”

El laughs, head tilting back to expose the graceful length of her throat, skin looking soft and kissable and *oh god* he needs to get himself under control and *fast*. “Well, you sure know how to make a girl feel special,” El says with a cute little shrug, almost a flirtatious shimmy of her shoulders, her ponytail swaying with the motion.

Mike can’t help the way he smiles. “Maybe I just know how to make *you* feel special,” he says, words out of his mouth before he can stop them and, despite the way he feels his cheeks flush, he can’t regret them. Especially not when El blushes in return, her lips stretching in a shy, gentle smile.

“Charmer,” she says, voice turning soft and almost intimate, eyes sparkling as she looks up at him. Their eyes meet and, once again, there’s a moment that passes between them, deep and heavy and filled with unspoken promises and hints of something *powerful*. Mike’s starting to lose count of how often this happens, but he never minds it. Far from it, actually. It’s thrilling and heartening and makes him feel breathlessly overwhelmed each time it happens. He can’t get enough.

Mike breaths out small laugh, breaking the moment. “Walk you out to your car?” he says, noting the time. “It’s getting late and, well...”

El raises an eyebrow. “You do know I can see where I parked from this studio, right?”

Mike shrugs. “Humor me, ok?”

El grins. “Charming *and* a gentleman. It’s a wonder you’re still single.”

“God, have you been talking to my mother?” Mike says as he laughs,

shaking his head a bit.

El giggles, waving him off. “Just let me change my shoes, grab my things, and then you can walk me the 30 feet to my car.”

“Thank you,” Mike says. “I’ll sleep easier.”

El shakes her head as she brushes past him for the small cabinet by the podium. “You know, I distinctly remember telling you my dad was a cop and made me take self-defense lessons. You do remember that, right?”

“Hey, my mother raised me to treat a lady right,” Mike says, watching as she sits down in a nearby chair to start taking off her ballet shoes. “Doesn’t matter how badass she is.”

“Well, tell your mom I say thank you.”

“Oh, I’ll be sure to pass on that on,” Mike says, chuckling. A half a second later, a completely different thought comes to mind as he remembers *why* he even came over to the studio in the first place. “Oh, hey, before I forget, I wanted to ask you: why were you dancing to a song from the Battlestar Galactica soundtrack?”

El looks up at him, smiling broadly. “You recognize it!” she says, looking like Christmas has come early or something. “God, I didn’t think *anyone* would get the reference.”

Mike feels his brows lift towards his hairline and he knows he must look horribly confused. “Wait, what?”

El laughs, shaking her head. “Ok, so, I’m part of an amateur dance company here in the city and this Saturday, we’re having a Halloween themed dance exhibition – kind of like a recital. The theme is ‘Other Worlds’, so people are dancing to songs from Harry Potter and Wizard of Oz and whatnot. Everyone gets to choose their own piece of music and choreograph something and wear themed costumes.”

El finishes taking off her ballet shoes and she reaches over inside the cabinet for a duffle bag she has stashed inside, grinning all the while. “Well, I love BSG and I *especially* love the soundtrack. So, I’m dressing

up as Number Six. I found a site where I could order the red dress she wears – you’re a guy, you know the one – and I got pointe shoes dyed to match. Hell, I even found a blonde wig that matches her platinum blonde hair style. It’s going to be *great*. Anyway, I was just using the studio here as a place to do some last minute practice.”

Ok, this is going to be a problem. Because now Mike’s picturing her in that revealing red dress – god, every red-blooded, male sci-fi fan (and probably not a few women) knows that dress, has *fantasized* about that dress – and he knows the image of her wearing it is going to haunt his dreams. *God, she’s probably going to be so hot in that dress.* “Wow, sounds awesome,” Mike says, trying to rediscover his equilibrium. “Also, wait, you’re a BSG fan?”

El pulls a pair of sweats out of her duffle bag and slips them on under her skirt. “It’s one of my favorites,” she says, grinning. “I did a lot of traveling and, in my downtime, I preferred to hang back in my room and watch Netflix. It was one of the shows I watched while I was overseas and I binged the whole series when it was still on Netflix. It’s great, I love it. It’s one of the few shows I own on Blu-ray.”

Man, she really is perfect. Mike shakes his head, chuckling. “Seriously, how are you real?”

El takes off her skirt over her sweats. “You trying to flatter me, Mr. Wheeler?” she says, winking.

Mike can feel his face heating up – god, that wink was sexier than it had any right to be – but he just laughs. “No, just marveling that I live in a world where pretty girls who like science fiction exist, is all.”

El blushes, even as she’s smiling. “Aww, you think I’m pretty,” she says as she drops a pair of flip-flops on the ground and slips them on her feet.

Mike has no good response to that, so he deflects. “Anyway, I’m ready to go whenever you are.”

The way El’s smiling at him says that she knows he’s deflecting...and she’s letting him get away with it. “Yeah, just let me put on my jacket

and lock up.”

Mike slowly makes his way to the door to the studio, watching as El puts on a jacket, grabs her things, and turns off the lights. He hovers nearby as she locks up the door, mentally scoffing at himself. Like El said, she has self-defense training and he perpetually got beaten up in high school until he joined the swim team, so how does he think he’s going to be of any help if someone’s lingering in the shadows? But it’s a good excuse to be close to her, to feel the way his whole body tingles at her proximity. Mike is quickly becoming addicted to being near El and he knows it’s a problem that’s only going to grow as the days go by.

El finishes locking the door and she looks up at him, smiling prettily in the waning twilight. “Alright, I’m ready for my escort.”

Mike rolls his eyes even as his heart does a funny flip in his chest. “You’re a real comedian.”

“And you like it, so quit complaining,” El says as they start walking, nudging his arm with her shoulder, her purse jingling as she fishes through it for her keys with her other hand.

“You’re lucky I find you funny,” Mike says. “Don’t know how many other people would put up with your hijinks.” He nudges her back with his elbow, signaling that he’s just teasing.

“Oh, I’m hilarious and I know it and people love me for it,” El says. “Just ask anyone.”

“Yeah, ok, sure, I’ll get right on it,” Mike says, chuckling. They reach El’s car, a white Nissan sedan, and Mike watches as she unlocks the car, tossing her stuff in the backseat.

“Right,” El says. “Consider myself escorted. I have arrived safely. Your duty is done, sir.”

Mike lets out another laugh – god, he could just talk to her all day and never get bored. “Alright, well, I’ll see you tomorrow, then. And, in case I forget to mention it, good luck on Saturday. I’m sure you’ll be great. I mean, you’re amazing, so....”

El reaches out, a soft smile on her face, and lays her hand on his upper arm, giving him a fond squeeze. The butterflies in Mike's stomach explode in a flurry of tickling wings, his whole body lighting up with warm tingles. "Thanks, Mike. I appreciate it." She lets go and Mike wishes she didn't have to. "Well, see you tomorrow, then."

"Right. Night, El. Drive safe."

El grins as she opens her car door. "You, too. Good night, Mike."

Mike gives her one last smile before he turns to head to his own car, an older Audi, just a few spots down – the only other car in the parking lot at this point in the evening.

Mike's just buckling his seat belt when he sees El drive by, slowing to give him a delicate wave, a trill of her fingers that is just too fucking cute. Mike finds himself waving back and he watches her drive off, a stupid smile on his face, and is, as always, eager to see her again.

The Sunday before Halloween is a beautiful day: cool, sunny, the sky filled with thin, wispy clouds that streak across the sky and cast lazy shadows across every surface.

El's in an exceptionally good mood. It's a beautiful day, she's walking to her favorite coffee shop for a late morning latte, and she's riding the high of a successful performance.

God, it was *amazing*, performing again – being on stage, in costume, *dancing* for a crowd of people, sharing her art, her *passion*. It's all the things she loves about dancing with only a fraction of the pressure, just the way it should always be.

So, yeah, El's on Cloud 9. It's a gorgeous day, she had a great night the night before, and the late morning air is nice and crisp in her lungs, her ears are filled with soft music coming from her earbuds, nice and chill and relaxing on this beautiful Sunday morning.

Yes, she has work tomorrow, which is a little bit of a bummer

because she hates having to wake up early (but, also, it's really is another opportunity to see Mike again, so she's excited nonetheless), but she has absolutely nothing that needs to be done today. No, she's going to get her late morning latte, maybe even indulge in a croissant, and read the new book she bought on the Kindle that's in her purse, all the while cozied up in a coffee shop. And, maybe later, she'll go home and curl up on the couch and find a new series on Netflix to binge. It's the kind of quiet, peaceful life she always craved when she was dancing professionally and it's more satisfying than she ever imagined.

El rounds the corner and walks a few doors down the block to the front door of The Windy Café, her cute, local coffee shop that's only a few blocks from her brownstone. She usually heads here earlier in the morning, or after work for an early evening pick-me-up, so it's a different kind of crowd that's gathered inside the homey café. It's the post-breakfast, pre-brunch crowd, people sitting and lounging between plans or just enjoying the plush seating and decadent baked goods.

El only spares a quick glance for the café's inhabitants as she approaches the counter and waits in line to order her coffee, passing the time by scrolling through her Instagram feed. It only takes a few minutes before El's up at the counter and she smiles at Casey, one of the regular baristas.

Casey smiles, the expression bright beneath bubblegum pink hair. "Morning, El. The usual?"

El giggles and looks down at the pastry case built into the counter. "The usual *and* something from this case. I'm splurging today. Any recommendations?" El feels like her eyes are bigger than her stomach – she wants one of *everything* – but they all look so good and she can't choose.

"Hmm," Casey says, leaning over. "Well, our berry tarts are pretty good, same with the apple galette. But I think my favorite today is the chocolate almond croissant," she says, tapping on the case above where the item in question is located, fingernail with chipped, orange polish clicking against the glass.

“Ooh,” El says with a soft sigh as she looks at the recommended item, chocolate and almonds drizzled across the top of a croissant larger than her hand, looking rich and delicious. “That *does* look good. Sold.”

Casey grins. “Excellent. For here or to go?”

“For here,” El says. “I’m in no hurry today.”

“Lucky,” Casey says, giving El a wry look, before ringing her up. “Right, I’ll bring both of these out to you when your drink is ready,” she says after El pays.

El smiles. “Great, thanks!”

And, with that, El turns to find a seat. Most of the prime spots are taken, by couples passing the time, or people studying and/or working, laptops open in front of them, books piled on tables, a gorgeous, luxurious head of black hair hunched over a laptop, dark eyes intent and focused and *oh so sexy* and-

-Wait.

Mike?

Gasping, El’s jaw drops just a bit as her worlds converge on themselves. What in the hell is Mike doing here?

(And how did she get so lucky?)

Her feet are carrying her towards him on automatic and El stops just mere feet in front of the table Mike’s sitting at. She takes a moment to look at him, drinking in the sight. He hasn’t quite noticed she’s there yet, so El has ample opportunity to stare. Mike’s dressed casually, wearing a soft, faded navy t-shirt that does *marvelous* things to his shoulders and a pair of worn, acid-washed jeans, and the look on his face is determined, focused, eyes dark, bottom lip pulled between his teeth. El can’t help but shiver.

But, there’s only so long she can stand and stare before he’s fully aware she’s here, so El takes the plunge and smiles. “Of all the gin joints,” she says, nearly laughing at the way Mike jumps, breath

leaving him in a startled huff. He looks up and the look in his eyes is frantic, confused, maybe even a little excited.

It only takes a second for Mike to understand what he's seeing and El can see the moment recognition fills his eyes, his lips stretching up in a broad smile. El's heart flutters in her chest, sending waves of warmth coursing through her veins. "El! What are you doing here?"

El knows the question isn't an accusatory one, but surprised and confused Mike is so cute, El can't help but have a bit of fun. "What, am I not allowed here? Didn't know you'd staked your claim to this particular coffee shop."

As expected, her words cause Mike to flush deeply and his mouth moves a few times before sound manages to come out. "No, that's not what I – I mean, I'm just surprised – I didn't – I, you–" Mike closes his eyes and clamps his lips together. It takes all of El's effort not to burst out laughing as she watches Mike pull in a deep, steadyng breath. "Can I start over?" he says, not opening his eyes.

"You going to ramble at me again?" El teases.

Mike opens his eyes and the deadpan he gives her is just *fantastic*. El's never seen anyone do "deadpan derision" better than Mike Wheeler. "Oh, ha ha," he breathes. But the moment is reset when he smiles. "No, seriously, what are you doing in the neighborhood?"

El grins. "I could be asking you the same thing," she says before gesturing at the empty chair across from him. "Can I sit?"

Mike blinks, a bit caught off guard, but he nods, causing his hair to fall into his eyes, which requires a shake of his head to toss it aside. "Of course," he says. "Wait, why could you ask me the same thing?" he asks as she sits.

El arches an eyebrow. "This is my local coffee shop," she says while she sets her purse down by her feet. "I live only a few blocks away." She points in the general direction of her brownstone. "I come here all the time, usually early in the mornings."

"Really?" Mike asks, mouth gaping just a bit, pleased surprise

blossoming on his features. “I live only a couple blocks away from here, other direction.”

That flutter in El’s heart is a full on beat-skipping extravaganza now. “Oh, so we’re neighbors as well as colleagues, is what you mean to tell me,” she says, smiling as she leans forward and crosses her legs, aware she’s being coy and a little flirty. She doesn’t care, not one bit. Especially not when Mike leans forward as well, grinning in the way that never fails to take her breath away.

“Hey, I thought we were friends, too,” he says, arms crossing in front of him behind his laptop.

El gasps playfully, one hand coming up to press over her heart. “We’re friends? Oh be still my heart.”

“Hey, now,” Mike says, nudging her leg with his toe in a light kick. “No mocking the person who let you sit at their table.”

El’s about to come back with a witty rejoinder when she hears Casey’s voice off to the side. “Here you go, El. A chocolate almond croissant and a regular latte with 3 shots, your usual.”

Mike scrambles to move some of the stuff on the table aside so there’s space for El’s food and El turns as Casey’s setting down the large mug and plate with her pastry. “Thanks, Casey.”

Casey nods and looks over at Mike. “Hey, Mike. How you doing over here? Can I get you anything?”

Mike grins. “Pretty good. Still got those eclairs?”

“I think I can scrounge one up for you,” Casey says, weight shifting onto one leg as she puts her hand on her opposite hip. “Want me to put it on your tab?”

“Yes, please,” Mike says. He looks up at her and winks. “You’re the best.”

Casey grins, flushing a bit. “And don’t your forget it, Wheeler,” she says before she turns and walks away.

El's jaw drops and she lets out a shocked, envious gasp. "You have a tab? How did you get a tab? I want a tab."

"Slow your roll there, Envy Girl," Mike says with an amused shake of his head. "I've been coming here for almost 3 years and I'm here practically every Saturday, sometimes on Sundays. They know I'm good for it."

El pouts. "Still, no fair."

Mike chuckles. "Well, if it'll make you feel better, you can use my tab. Just let me know and you can pay me back when I settle up."

El shrugs, jealousy fading, and takes a sip of her latte. "Nah, it's cool. Thanks, though. I'll earn my own tab, thank you very much," she says, voice going prim at the end even though she's grinning.

Mike gives her a smile. "How's your day going? You seem to be in a good mood today," he says before a flash of realization comes over his face. "Oh, wait, your recital thing was last night, right? How'd it go?"

El's heart gives another flutter – *he remembered* – and her grin turns into a giddy smile. "It was great. Seriously, I forgotten how much I love performing. And everyone else's routines were amazing."

"That's great," Mike says, smiling fondly. "Did anyone know where your costume and music came from?"

El nods, leaning into the giddiness. "I had a couple of people come up after and mention it! I was so excited." A thought comes to mind and she giggles. "Wait, I have something to show you." El reaches for her phone and starts going through her photos, quickly finding the one from last night, posing with a couple of her friends from the dance company, each of them wearing their costumes. "Here," she says, passing the phone over. "Figured you'd like to see me in costume."

Mike takes the phone (El tries her best to ignore the feeling of his fingers brushing against hers and can't manage to suppress the shiver that runs through her) and she watches eagerly as he looks at the picture. She swears his eyes darken and fill with heat, and she

watches as he swallows roughly. “Wow,” he says after a second, voice pitched rough and low. “Uh, yeah, that’s that red dress, all right. You, uh...you look good.” Mike’s eyes linger on the photo maybe longer than is appropriate – like he’s trying to commit it to memory – and El loves the heat that fills her at the thought that he doesn’t want to look away, that he might be attracted to her, that he thinks she looks *really* good in that dress.

“Thanks,” El says, hand outstretched as Mike passes her phone back to her. “Dress is a little drafty, though. And the amount of double-sided tape that went in to keeping everything...*in place*, shall we say, was absurd.”

Mike looks at her and he gives her a once over, his gaze traveling down her torso and back up, his eyes on her heating her skin like a physical touch. “Yeah, I bet,” is what he says a half a beat later, the words soft and husky and, suddenly, El’s skin feels like it’s two sizes too small, like she’s just going to *burst*. Her face feels hot and every fiber of her being *itches* with the desire to lean over and kiss him.

Instead, El just looks down, one hand reaching up to tuck her hair behind her ear in a nervous gesture. It’s then that she spots the books that are sitting next to Mike’s open laptop and she lets out a happy little gasp, thrilled for *anything* to take her mind off how much she wants to kiss him right now.

Because, sitting next to Mike’s laptop is a small stack of 2 books and the one El can see is “Hunter’s Pursuit”, the second book of the Hunter Academy Quartet by DL Williams. Now, it’s not her *favorite* book series, but it’s definitely up there. “Oh my god, are you a DL Williams fan?” she asks, reaching for the top book. “God, I love these. So good. I can’t wait for the third one to come out.”

There’s a strange noise that comes from the back of Mike’s throat as El grabs the book. Her brow furrows as she takes in the post-it notes sticking out of pages. “You, uh...a fan?” Mike says, voice strangled and a little higher pitched than usual.

“Oh yeah,” El says as she flips through the pages, noting, with some interest, the scribbles and notes inside. She glances up at Mike, grinning, and wonders a bit at the strange look on his face – part

disbelief, part panic, part overjoyed. “One of the junior dancers at the ABT turned me on to them just before the second book came out. I picked both of them up right when the second book came out and I just devoured them over a weekend. I’ve read them each, like, 3 times since then.”

There’s a bit of a pause as El’s flipping through the pages before Mike speaks again. “Do you, um, have a favorite character?”

El looks up at Mike, book lying half open in her hands. “I *love* Cassie. That moment where she tricks the demon in ‘Hunter’s Rise’? I had *chills* the entire time. So amazing.” She glances back down at the pages in front of her and her brow furrows as she focuses on the writing in the margins. There are notes like “Make sure to remember this” or “HERO’S JOURNEY”, reminders and commentary and a lot of underlining. “So, are you a literary critic, or something?” El asks. “Or just a super fan?”

That earns El another weird choking noise out of Mike and she looks up at him, curious. Mike bites his lip, brow furrowing, gaze casting about like he’s debating something and isn’t sure what to do. A moment later, the look on Mike’s face turns determined and he looks her in the eye, letting out a soft breath. “No, I’m not a fan.”

The way Mike’s heart beats when El tells him she loves his books – *oh god, she loves them* – almost makes him dizzy and the strangled noise that escapes from him makes him feel like the world’s biggest mouthbreather. She keeps talking, though, revealing that she has a favorite character and, *oh god*, he’s going to faint. El loves his writing, loves his work...and she doesn’t even know *he* wrote them.

So, when she asks him if he’s a “super fan”, Mike knows he has a choice to make. He can lie and say “yes”...or he can tell her the truth he’s never told anyone before (the Party and his family don’t count – they’ve known he was a writer since before he got published).

And, as Mike looks over at her, the look on her face confused and

curious (*god, she's adorable today*, he can't help but notice, in jeans and a loose sweater, hair down, luxurious curls spilling down her shoulders and back), he knows, just knows, he's going to tell her the truth. Because he can't lie to her.

"No, I'm not a fan," he says, the words heavy and soft, sinking into his stomach as he says them.

El's brow furrows and her head tilts just a bit, her confusion deepening. "Then, why do you have these books? And all the notes inside?"

Mike glances down at his laptop screen, where he's working on the third book, "Hunter's Folly", and he takes in a deep breath. "Because I wrote them."

If anything, El looks even more confused. "Wait, are you saying *you're* DL Williams?"

Mike, again, cringes at the sound of his penname. "It's a penname," he says. "I didn't want to publish with my real name because I wanted to be able to teach and stay somewhat anonymous."

Mike can see the realization working its way through El's brain, but her face, still confused, takes on an edge of skepticism. "Prove it," she says.

"Fair enough," Mike says, smiling. He navigates through the documents folder on his laptop before he finds the electronic copy of the contract he signed. He opens it and turns the laptop screen around so El can see. "Here's the contract I signed with Scholastic. And, the creation date of the word document for 'Hunter's Rise' predates the publish date by two years, if you want more proof."

El reaches out, her jaw slowly dropping, surprise and shock managing to look beautiful on her, and she scrolls through the contract, hopefully noting the date it was signed. "Oh my god," she says after a few moments, turning the laptop back around as she leans back in her chair. "You're, like, one of my favorite authors." El's voice is hushed, *awed*, and yeah, ok, this feels good. *Really* good. Because Mike has managed to impress the most beautiful woman he's ever

met and he feels like he could do *anything*.

"Wait, who's your favorite author? I want to know who the competition is," Mike says, his smile widening, giddiness filling him. He's never used his status as a popular author to brag to beautiful women, but he's starting to see the appeal in leveraging his celebrity, just a bit.

But El's still focused on his books because her hand shoots out to clamp down on his forearm, her touch warm and thrilling on the bare skin right above his wrist. Mike shivers, unable to stop it, unwilling to pull away. "Oh my god, you *have* to tell me when the next book is coming out! I need to know what's happening with the Consortium." She pauses, gasping. "No, wait! Don't tell me, I want to be surprised." Another pause, this time to bite her lip as she thinks. Mike can't tear his gaze away from how her teeth sink into the soft flesh of her lower lip and, god, he wants to replace her teeth with his, wants to nibble on the soft fullness of her mouth, wants to know what her lips taste like against his. "Ok, wait, maybe just a hint," El says, voice hushed, removing her teeth so she can smile, the corners of her mouth turning up in a sly grin.

Mike's smiling so hard, it feels like he's never going to be able to stop. "A hint, huh? What do I get in return?" Ok, yeah, he's flirting. He's flirting *so hard* and he doesn't care that El knows it.

And El does know it, based on the way her cheeks flush and her mouth parts just so. "I don't know, what do you want?" Her voice is hushed, *husky*, almost seductive, and she quirks an eyebrow teasingly even as her tongue darts out to wet her lips. She still has her hand on his arm and Mike feels her thumb start to move back and forth against his skin in a gentle caress. *Holy shit*, she's flirting back.

Mike barely holds back the groan that threatens to rumble in his chest and, suddenly, everything is too hot as his blood boils, his skin tingles, and the familiar headiness of desire swirls in his stomach. God, what *doesn't* he want? *A kiss, a date, forever*, his brain whispers. "Your phone number," he says, mouth racing ahead of his brain. Mike can feel his face heat up, but he manages to keep from looking away. "You know, have to give you those hints somehow."

El smiles and ducks her head almost demurely, glancing up at him through her eyelashes as she giggles. “Ok,” she says, her hand leaving his arm to hold out in front of him, palm up. “Gimme your phone.”

Mike smiles and fumbles a bit to fish his phone out of his pocket. He unlocks it and navigates to his contacts, pulling up the screen for El to create a new one. “Here you go.” El’s still smiling as she takes his phone and the look in her eyes is full of heated mischief, sly and sparkling and mysterious. Her fingers move across the screen for about a minute before she hands it back and, a second later, *her* phone buzzes.

“There, sent myself a text message from you. Now I have your number, too,” she says as she hands back his phone, grinning.

Mike takes the phone from her, making sure to let his fingers brush against hers again, and he glances at the screen, laughing as he sees the name she gave herself in his phone. “Dancing Queen?” he reads.

“So you know it’s me,” El says, grin widening as she unlocks her own phone. “I think you’re going to be ‘Freckles’ in mine.”

Mike grimaces. “Freckles? Oh god....”

El giggles. “Oh, don’t take that tone with me,” she says, teasingly chastising. “Your freckles are adorable and you know it.”

El’s words hit Mike like a punch to the stomach. God, he’s always hated his freckles, hated the way they stand out like blotches on his skin. But the way El just referred to his freckles, her voice fond and happy, makes him start to think that maybe, *maybe*, his freckles aren’t so bad. How can he when she thinks they’re *adorable*?

Mike lets out cough, suddenly a little uncomfortable, and just shakes his head. “If you say so,” he says.

“I do say so,” El says with a decisive nod. She puts down her phone and props her head in one hand, palm cupping her chin, as she leans forward. “Right, I’m ready for that hint, Mr. Author.”

Mike chuckles. “Oh, are you, now?” he says and now they’re back to flirting, he realizes, as he grins and mirrors her posture, leaning in

with his head resting on his hand.

El giggles. “I was born ready,” she says before she waggles her eyebrows. “Trust me.”

And Mike does – *oh*, how he does. El’s words, spoken light-heartedly, hit him with a pang right in the heart. He trusts her with *everything* – his secret, his heart, his life. He knows she would never hurt him, would never betray him. He knows this in the same way that he knows the sky is blue and the sun rises in the east – it’s just part of him, now, a fundamental facet of the universe.

Still, now’s not the time for heart-stopping revelations – not when El is looking at him with expectant and eager eyes, her lips stretched in a giddy smile – and Mike grins as he starts to speak, voice dropping to low, hushed tones. “Right, so, you can’t tell *anybody* this....”

Giving Mike her phone number is the *best* thing El’s ever done. One, it got her the inside scoop on one of her favorite book series (and she is *never* getting over that she is friends – and maybe, *hopefully*, something more – with one of her favorite authors). And, two, it means she gets to talk to Mike *whenever* she wants.

El and Mike start texting *all the time* and about everything. He texts her between classes or when he’s proctoring an exam. She texts him before and after rehearsal and when she’s watching something on Netflix to give him her running commentary. They text each other good night and when they find something funny and/or interesting while they’re out running errands or hanging out with friends. Mike texts her whenever he’s going to The Windy Café and El texts back to ask him to save her a seat. They flirt and they tease and they have long, in-depth text conversations about everything and nothing. El’s literally never had a better time talking to anyone in her entire life.

Another thing they also text about? The Winter Ball and how frustrating and annoying it is to help the students plan. Especially as Mike and El often end up having to pick up whatever slack the kids

forget about.

Which is how El finds herself at school at 6:40 in the morning on a Tuesday the second week of November, helping the planning committee set up a last minute bake sale to do one final round of fundraising. The dance is mostly paid for, thanks to the very generous donations of some of the more affluent parents, but the students still need a little bit more money for decorations.

El's not supposed to be here at all, still a little bleary-eyed as the caffeine hasn't quite kicked in yet. But Melanie, Paula, and Caroline had practically *begged* her yesterday afternoon – "Please, Ms. H. The rest of the dance committee flaked out on us and we *need* your help." – and El, being the nice person that she is, immediately acquiesced, telling them she'd be here when they needed her.

Which, as it turns out, is 6:30 in the morning.

So now El's standing in the locker area, helping Melanie set up a table and listening to the girl fret as she tries to figure out how to arrange the vast array of baked goods on the small card table she has. "Oh, this isn't going to work," Melanie all but whines. "We *need* a bigger table." Her face lights up and El feels a frisson of suspicion ripple down her spine. "Oh, Ms. Hopper, I think there's a large fold up table in the supply closet that we've used before. Do you think you could go find that for me? I'd go get it myself, but I don't have keys to the building."

El fights the urge to roll her eyes, but she can't stop the heaved sigh that slips past her lips. "Alright, I'll go look. But...." El trails off, looking around just to check that she and Melanie are alone (not that anyone else is there, *it's 6:40 in the fucking morning*). "Do you think you could tell me *where* the supply closet is? I'm still figuring out where everything is," she says. God, this is embarrassing, asking a student for help. She *should* know where the supply closet is.

The smile that Melanie gives El, while helpful, is also eager in a way that only amplifies the wary suspicion that's building in El's gut. "Oh, it's somewhere in the gym, I think. I don't go out there that much, but there should be a sign, I would imagine."

El gives Melanie what feels like a tight smile and she nods. “Right, well, I’m sure I’ll be able to find it. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

With that, El makes her way to the gym, which is on the other side of campus, after a quick stop by her office to grab her keys. Her heels click and clack against first the tile and then the paved walkways between buildings. She shivers as the cold morning air hits her bare legs – the sun has just barely broken over the horizon – and she’s *seriously* regretting wearing a skirt (it’s a really, *really* cute skirt, though – A-line, tight through mid-thigh, flaring out gently just above the knees – and she’d be lying if she said she didn’t start getting dressed with Mike in mind, hoping that she hasn’t misinterpreted the way she’s sometimes caught him eyeing her legs).

So El hurries to the gym complex and manages to unlock the main door after only a couple of tries. El rushes through the door and the weight of it slams shut behind her. She shivers, shaking her arms to work warmth back into them. “Gonna need to start dressing warmer,” El grumbles as she starts down the hallway.

The gym complex is a large building, filled with a couple of basketball courts, a badminton court, a volleyball court, an indoor swimming pool, and a weight room. And *somewhere* in here, a supply closet with a folding table.

El moves up and down the hallways, checking signs on the doors, her only accompaniment the sound of her heels clicking against the tile floor.

But, when El passes by the door to the swimming pool, she hears another noise: the sound of splashing water. El pauses in front of the doors to the indoor swimming pool and looks at them, eyes narrowing. *Someone* has snuck into the pool. El’s not exactly in the mood to be charitable and said trespasser is so getting detention.

Pursing her lips and putting on her sternest expression, El pushes the door open and steps inside pool room, the warm, humid air immediately engulfing her, the lights above dimly lit.

There’s someone in the pool and they’re just doing laps back and forth. El doesn’t know much about swimming outside of what she

watches during the Olympics, but whoever is swimming seems to be pretty good – good speed, strokes cutting smoothly through the water. But that doesn't erase the fact that whoever this is *shouldn't* be here in the first place!

Drawing in a deep breath, El squares her shoulders. "Hey!" she yells as loud as she can (which, admittedly, is *really* loud – benefits of having a cop for a dad). "Get out of the pool!"

It takes a moment, but the person in the pool stops and turns in the water to look over at the intrusion, hands reaching up to remove a pair of goggles. "El?"

El's brow furrows at the familiar address, but a split second later, she recognizes the voice. "Mike?"

In the pool, Mike grins as he removes his goggles, other hand coming up to slick his hair back away from his face. "What are you doing here? Also, you can yell *really* loud by the way."

For a moment, El doesn't know what to say as Mike ducks beneath the swim lane dividers and heads for the ladder out of the pool that's only a few feet away from her. But she recovers her voice as Mike's hands reach out for the handles of the ladder. "I'm helping set up for the bake sale. Apparently there's a folding table in the supply closet, but—" El loses the capacity for words as Mike steps out of the pool and she fully notices just how much Mike *isn't* wearing.

"God, Melanie manage to rope you into helping her out?" Mike asks as he steps all the way out of the water and heads for the nearby bleachers where, as El dimly notices, there's a duffle bag and a towel.

El thinks she might permanently have lost the ability to speak as she stares at Mike. He's wearing tight swim shorts...and literally nothing else, exposing the form that hides beneath button down shirts and pressed slacks.

And he's *beautiful*. All lean muscle and soft, pale skin, El can't stop looking at the lines of his torso, the sweep of his shoulders, the taper of his waist. And, god, she almost whimpers as he leans down to grab the towel, the muscles of his back shifting as he reaches, the smooth

ripple of his shoulder blades moving beneath his skin. Mike runs the towel over his chest and arms before running it over his hair, turning towards her at the same time. The move gives El the opportunity to ogle his bare chest, taking in the fine smattering of hair on his chest, the gently defined muscle of his pecs, the smooth, flawless skin of his abdomen, the hollows of his hips.

El's seen a lot of shirtless men in her time as a dancer, men whose bodies put models to shame, who women ogled and drooled over all the time. And *none* of them have ever affected her in the way that Mike has. Her whole body flushes with warmth, heat pooling in her veins, her heart racing and thumping in her chest. God, she just wants to reach out and *touch*, wants to trail her fingers over every inch of exposed skin, to map a path for her mouth to follow, to find what makes him sigh and moan and laugh. She wants it *all*, more than she's ever wanted anything in her entire life.

"El?" The towel drapes around Mike's shoulders, but El's still mostly paying attention to his half naked body. "Hey, El, my eyes are up here." The words are spoken with good humor, but they're enough to shock El out of the stupor she's in.

She can feel her whole face flushing as she drags her eyes up – along the sweep of his collarbones, the smooth column of his neck, the cut of his jaw and cheekbones – until she can look him in the eye and she blinks, shaking her head as if it can erase the images dancing in her head. "Sorry," she says, voice sounding weak. "Coffee hasn't fully kicked in yet." It's the *lamest* excuse and she knows that Mike knows it.

But, thankfully, Mike just smirks. "Right, damn that caffeine," he says, teasingly.

If anything, El blushes *harder*, but she somehow manages a smile (it's hard, so hard, when his hair is so adorably and rakishly disheveled, wet strands falling in his face, curling just so, inviting her to run her fingers through). "So, a swimmer?"

Mike lets out a laugh. "Yeah, joined swim team in high school. Was a good way to make friends, plus I really like being in the water. The pool here isn't used too heavily in the mornings – not until swim

team starts up in the spring – so I take advantage of it.”

“Oh, good. Swimming is good,” El says, feeling like her brain’s still a half a second behind, like there’s a fog that’s settled over her. *Yeah, a sexual one*, the thinking portion of her brain teases.

Mike laughs, clearly amused. “Right, the supply closet?”

Ooh, yes, supply closet. Great place to be alone....

Wait, no, supply closet. Folding table. *Bake sale*. Dammit, she’s an adult. She *can* get herself under control, honest. “Yes, right,” El says, voice still feeling a little weak, high pitched – god, even breathy. “You, um...wouldn’t know where it is, would you?”

That earns El another laugh and Mike shakes his head in amusement. “Yeah, c’mon. I’ll show you.”

“Thank you,” El all but squeaks.

Mike moves to walk past her and El turns to follow, rushing to catch up (trying her damnedest *not* to stare at his ass in his tight swim shorts – she only *mostly* succeeds). Out in the hallway, it’s only a couple of turns before Mike stops, turning to gesture at the locked double doors with a jerk of his thumb. “Well, here it is. Everything you need should be in here.”

Not everything. El gulps and nods. “Thanks,” she says, managing to smile. “I really appreciate it.”

Mike smiles back, lips curling gently in a way that makes El want to pull him down by the ends of the towel hanging around his neck and kiss him until neither of them can remember their names. “Anytime,” he says. “Well, I’m going to go take a shower, get ready for school. I’ll come by to see if you guys need any help in a bit, ok?”

“Ok, thanks. That’d be great,” El says.

Mike gives her another smile and starts walking away, pushing past her down the hallway. El takes a moment to gather herself before she goes to unlock the supply closet, rotating through the keys on her keychain to figure out which one it is. “Oh, El?” Mike calls out as El’s

trying a key in the lock – her second try, the first one was a no-go.

El turns back, hands frozen by the doorknob. “Yeah?” she says, unable to resist giving him another once-over as she looks at him again – if he could just never wear a shirt again, that’d be *fantastic*.

Mike gives her a smile that is almost a grin, full of mischief and warmth. “You should join me for laps some time. It’s great exercise.”

I know what else is great exercise, her thoughts all but purr and El swallows the gasp that threatens to escape at the thought. “Oh, um, yeah, maybe,” she says before she shrugs. “I mean, I’m not much of a swimmer, so, we’ll see.”

Mike chuckles. “I’m sure I’ll be able to convince you. See you in a bit,” he says, giving her a wink before he turns and disappears around a corner.

El huffs out a breath, tension bleeding from her now that Mike’s no longer in view (though the heat of desire still floods her veins and sets her heart thumping heavily in her chest). “Ok, good,” she breathes to herself. “He’s nice, sweet, funny, smart, and sexy as all hell. Great, this is just great.” El inserts a third key in to the lock and turns, the door to the supply closet opening smoothly. “I want to jump my coworker *and* I’m totally falling in love with him. This is just fantastic. Very professional, El. So adult.”

And now she’s talking to herself. Good, great, excellent, well done.

God, what is she going to do? The time for denial is long, *long* past and she’s also rapidly leaving behind the ability to sit and do nothing about the feelings that only grow deeper as the days go by. Eventually, she’s going to reach her breaking point and do *something* about the way she feels about him. El only hopes she makes the right moves when she does.

And, hopefully, Mike feels the same way.

Notes for the Chapter:

Things are heating up and these two lovebirds are in for a fun ride, y’all. So buckle your seatbelts!

Hopefully, I'll have the next chapter out in a couple of weeks (just to give myself a bit of a buffer, haha). So stay tuned for that! And thank you for reading!
hugs I love y'all.

4. Every Breath You Take

Notes for the Chapter:

In exchange for this taking *really fucking long to write*, it's 24k words! Trade-offs, amirite?

So, buckle up, folks, this is about to get wild and flirty....

(Also, warning: there's some, um...*suggestive* imagery in this chapter. Like, T+ range. As always, forewarned is forearmed....)

It's been 6 days, 4 hours, and 43 minutes (give or take a couple of minutes) since that moment in the pool room – 6 days, 4 hours, and 43 minutes of pounding hearts, heated looks, longing sighs, and a desire so deep, it threatens to swallow El whole.

Yes, El's counted. Of course she has.

Because it's been 6 days, 4 hours, and 43 minutes since she learned what Mike Wheeler looks like without a shirt.

And she hasn't been the same since.

El has it bad. She has it *real* bad. It feels like he exists in every waking moment, in every breath she takes, in every thought she has. And at night...*god*, at night....

El dreams about Mike every night – dreams of him, of the two of them together. Some are tame – holding hands while they walk, warm hugs where he folds his arms around her and holds her tight, gentle kisses and soft snuggles. El wakes up from these feeling like she's on a cloud, loved and cocooned.

Most of her dreams, though, are anything *but* tame. Dreams that leave her gasping for breath, *aching* with want, skin hot and too tight, blood racing like fire in her veins-

(his hands on her skin, his mouth following the trail left by his fingers –

hands roaming and touching and teasing, his breath hot against her ear with the sound of her name – the weight and friction of his body against hers, her body surging to meet his as he moves against her, on top of her, beneath her...)

-god, she thinks about these dreams practically every time she looks at Mike and it takes everything she has to keep from blushing whenever she does, to keep from giving *everything* away when she looks at him. Because El sometimes fears that everything she's feeling is written on her face and she's *so* not ready to come clean with her feelings for Mike.

At least, not until she knows what she's going to do about this. And that's the problem. *How do you tell your coworker you've fallen in love with them? That you want them in your life, in your heart...in your bed.*

El shakes her head at the thought. God, she's *incurrigible*. It's like the lid's been taken off her libido and, suddenly, she's 18 again, just a walking bundle of hormones.

Man, I need to get a handle on this and fast. But, again, how? El's never really been the instigator in a relationship. In the past, her old boyfriends had been the one to make the first move – all El had to do was go along with the ride, as it were.

So, how to tell a guy you've fallen in love with them, how to make that first move? El has no idea and she knows she's gonna need to ask a guy for advice.

Only, *that's* a problem. El doesn't have very many guy friends. And the ones she *does* have? Yeah, they've had courtside seats to all of El's dating disasters and they *still* never let her live some of them down. So, *that's* not happening.

They'd never let her hear the end of this, falling for a coworker. God, El can just hear it now – *Wow, Janie, way to be a walking HR disaster.* – *That hard up, huh? Can't wait to see how this is going to backfire.* – *There are good places to find guys besides your place of employment, you do know that, right?* – Yeah...scratch that idea.

I'd rather talk to my dad about my love life.

It's this thought that's going through El's mind when, at 6 days, 4 hours, and 44 minutes, a knock sounds on El's open office door, pulling her from her reverie.

El looks up to see Liz Hiroto, smiling as she leans into El's office. "Hey Liz, what's up?" El says as she returns the smile.

"Just wanted to see if you wanted to join us in the teacher's lounge for lunch. Gwen brought homemade pie in honor of Thanksgiving this week and it's not something to be missed."

El's smile turns into a grin. "Ooh, what kind of pie?"

"There's options, but only if you come and see. You should stay and have lunch with us while you're there," Liz says. "I know, I know, you tend to eat lunch in here so the students can come to you, but you should also make time for your coworkers, you know?"

El almost cringes – god, it's true; with the exception of Mike, she really hasn't made a lot of time for her coworkers – but she nods, smiling softly as she gets up from her desk. "Alright, sounds good. I need to grab my lunch from the refrigerator, anyway. Besides, how can I pass up homemade pie?"

"How, indeed?" Liz says with a chuckle. "I'd suddenly have the need to question your sanity."

El nudges Liz with her shoulder as they start walking towards the teacher's lounge. "Hey, now. That's just mean."

When they enter the teacher's lounge, there's already a small crowd sitting around the oval shaped table, mainly El's female colleagues, and one of them, the aforementioned Gwen Hurley, who teaches Biology, turns to look over at El and Liz. "Well, hey there, you two. Here for pie?"

"You know it," Liz says. "Whatcha got this year, Gwen?"

"Apple, chocolate cream, and pecan pumpkin," Gwen says, her grin sly beneath frizzy blonde hair. She focuses on El and there's a teasing glint in her eye. "Well, what have we here? A glimpse of the elusive El Hopper, out from her cave, foraging for food."

El blushes and rolls her eyes. “Oh, very funny, Gwen.”

“I’m just funning,” Gwen says with a wave of her hand. “Here, there’s plenty of room. Grab your lunch and come join us. What kind of pie you want?”

El walks over to the table and peers down, her mouth watering at the sight of the desserts sitting in the middle of the table, a few slices already cut out of each. “Ooh, decisions, decisions....” El murmurs, biting her lip. “Um, I’ll have some of the chocolate cream pie.” If it wasn’t the worst idea in the history of time, El would skip her lunch and just have a slice of each. But she made her lunch and it’s sitting in the fridge and, really, having pie for lunch is a *horrible* decision.

With El’s order voiced, Gwen grabs a paper plate and a knife. “One slice of chocolate cream, coming right up.”

El smiles. “Thanks,” she says as she turns to fetch her lunch from the refrigerator. And when she comes back, sitting down in the empty seat next to Liz, there’s a piece of pie waiting for her, looking rich and decadent and El’s tongue tingles in anticipation. “The pie looks fantastic, Gwen,” El says, looking over at the older woman.

Gwen waves her hand, flushing gently under the praise. “Oh, please, it’s nothing. Not like some of those people you see on those cooking shows or the internet.”

“You’re selling yourself short, Gwennie,” another one of El’s colleagues says – Monica Redford, American History teacher, a tall, willowy, model-thin woman with deep auburn hair streaked with a few strands of silver. She’s sitting across the table from El as she eats her lunch, a leftover stir fry. “Every year, you deflect praise. And every year, your pies are amazing.”

“Yes, and it’s getting old, the way you downplay your accomplishments.” This comes from Antoinette Ferreira, or Annie, as she likes to be called – an Afro-Brazilian woman who teaches Algebra and Pre-Calculus. Her English is spoken with only a hint of an accent, a sign of how long it’s been since she moved the States.

Aside from Liz, who’s only a few years older than El, all of El’s female

colleagues all have at least 10 years on her and they all make El feel young in a way that grates. They all have so many life experiences, things El never got a chance to do while she was lost in the world of professional dancing and, though she likes her female colleagues, she feels *immature* next to them.

"I've always preferred homemade pie," El says, her voice sounding too small. "No one at home was ever a good enough cook to make it, but whenever my friend's mom would, I would always beg my friend to save me a slice. It always tasted so much better than whatever we got at a restaurant or the store. Something about that personal touch, you know?"

Gwen gives El a soft smile. "Well, I hope this lives up to your memories."

"I'm sure it will," El says as she unwraps her lunch – a chicken salad sandwich on whole wheat.

Around her, the conversation carries on without her and El just listens in – everyone's discussing their plans for Thanksgiving, which is only a few days away. School's in session Monday and Tuesday, but they're off Wednesday, which is when El is planning on travelling home to Indiana for Thanksgiving with her family. Not everyone will be there, but it'll be nice to see people she loves who she hasn't seen in a while, like her grandmother, Hop's mom, who's pushing 80 and still going strong.

El's enjoying hearing everyone talk and kvetch, all good-naturedly, about putting up guests and running interference between recalcitrant family members, when the door to the teacher's lounge opens behind her and a strange frisson of energy travels down El's spine. She doesn't even have to turn to know who's walked in through the door – *Mike* – but she turns anyway, heart picking up the pace until it's thumping hard against her ribcage.

"Did I miss the pie?" Mike asks as he approaches the table, grinning mischievously at Gwen before he looks down at El, his smile softening. "Hi, El."

"Hi, Mike," El says back, her voice as soft as his smile, and she

sounds way too breathy even to her own ears. But she can't help it. Mike's wearing a dark navy, fitted button down shirt, collar unbuttoned to show the hollow between his collarbones, and equally fitted grey slacks. His hair is its usual orderly chaos, looking like he's tried taming it by running his fingers through it, but only managing to look rakish and windswept instead.

God, he looks good enough to eat.

"Well, hello to you, too, String Bean," Gwen teases. "Whatcha want? There's plenty left of each."

It's only because El's looking up at him that she sees Mike glance at her, *something* in his gaze flickering as his eyes land on hers, before he looks past her to the pies. "What do you recommend?" he asks, question aimed at Gwen.

"Personally, the pecan pumpkin's my favorite," Gwen says. "But it depends on what mood you're in."

"Hmm, I think I'll take some of that chocolate one," Mike says. "I could go for a little decadence in my life right about now."

"You got it, Mike," Gwen says.

Mike smiles his gratitude before he refocuses on El, his face lighting up. "Oh, hey, I remembered that movie I was telling you about. Remember, one with the folding cities?"

El giggles. "You mean the one you made sound like 'Inception'? Despite how much you protested?"

Mike gives her a look. "Hey, it's not my fault you can't read my mind. And, really, there are some similar themes!"

"Uh huh," El says, grinning. "Suuure."

"Alright, can it, Hopper," Mike says through a huffed sigh.

El arches an eyebrow. "Well, what's the movie?"

A startled look flashes across Mike's face and he flushes a bit. "Oh,

it's 'Dark City'. Trippy as all hell. Have you seen it?"

The movie doesn't sound familiar and El shakes her head. "No, I don't think I have."

"I think you'd like it," Mike says, his lips regaining their smile. "It's been a long time since I've seen it, but I can pretty safely recommend it."

El smiles. "Alright, I'll check it out sometime," she says. *Ask him to join you!* her heart begs, but El ignores the urge and swallows the words that leap to the tip of her tongue.

"Hey, when you do, tell me what you think. I wanna know," Mike says as he reaches for the slice of pie Gwen's holding out to him. "Thanks, Gwen."

"How about I liveblog it for you over text, will that make you happy?" El asks, giggling.

"Oh, absolutely," Mike says, giving her a quick wink that causes her stomach to do a flip, effervescence sparkling through her veins. "Well, I should get back – I have a Chem lab to prep for. Thanks again, Gwen."

"Go play with your chemical compounds, Mike," Gwen says as Mike waves at her.

"Bye, Mike," El says, unable to keep her voice, once again, from going soft and breathy – *wistfully longing*.

"Bye, El. Talk to you later," Mike says, his own voice dropping, before he turns to head back out the way he came. El watches him leave, unable to look away, eyes drinking in the sight of him, all long and lean and graceful and so damn sexy. She can't help the sigh that escapes from her lips, barely audible, before she turns back around to the rest of the table...

...Only to come face-to-face with everyone else looking at her with amused grins and arched eyebrows. El flushes, knowing she's been caught. "What?" she asks, trying to deflect and hoping to get away with it.

“Hon, you have it *bad*,” Gwen says through a gentle giggle.

Damn, no such luck. El’s breath catches in her throat, panic flooding her at the sudden exposure of what she’s been able to keep to herself...until now. “I-”

“Don’t try to deny it,” Liz says. “We’ve *all* seen the way you look at him.”

“I don’t blame you,” Monica says. “If *I* were 10 years younger....” She trails off with a sly waggle of her eyebrows, grinning.

“You and me, both,” Gwen says, chuckling.

“But, I – I mean, isn’t it...inappropriate? I mean, we *work* together,” El says, feeling the underlying guilt that’s been plaguing her for weeks come rising to the surface.

Annie clucks her tongue. “Matters of the heart are never inappropriate. You have feelings for him. How can that be wrong?” Then she smiles, grinning, eyes sparkling. “Besides, it’s not as if there is a policy against it.”

At this, El feels her brow rise, frowning her skepticism. “Really? That seems like an HR nightmare waiting to happen.”

Annie shrugs dismissively. “Schools used to be a great place for young unmarried women teachers to meet their future husbands and, well, St. Ignatius has never changed its policy regarding staff relationships against it. As long as you don’t get caught *in flagrante delicto* in your office by a student, no one really cares.”

The thought of getting caught in a compromising position in her office *with Mike* brings memories of some of the dreams she’s had about him rushing to the forefront of her mind (*her perched on the edge of her desk, him standing between her thighs, his hands pushing up her skirt as she unbuttons his shirt, mouths doing unspeakable things to each other, blood boiling, hearts pounding, yes, god yes*) and El blushes fiercely. “Oh god,” she breathes, leaning forward to rest her head in her hand, palm pressed against her forehead as she tries to calm the pounding of her heart and the rush of desire that sweeps through her,

making her feel light-headed.

“Well, well, well,” El hears Monica say. “Looks like *someone’s* been having some, shall we say, *interesting* thoughts.”

“Don’t you start,” El groans, lifting her head. “I’m embarrassed enough as it is.”

“Sorry,” Monica says, though the smile on her face betrays the sentiment. “Don’t blame you, though. Boy looks good enough to eat.”

The flush on El’s cheeks only deepen because, *dammit*, she just had the same thought about 5 minutes ago. “Look, can we just move on to something else? Please?” God, she’s *so* embarrassed right now and that embarrassment, warm and poignant and fluttery, mixes with the tangled excitement she feels for Mike, with the hope and anticipation and *fondness* she’s come to associate with him. And it all makes her feel really exposed right now in a way that she’s not used to being in front of others.

There’s a pregnant pause before Gwen lets out a sardonic laugh. “So, anyone planning on getting trampled on Black Friday?” The conversation swiftly, *thankfully*, moves on to holiday shopping and braving the crowds and El’s grateful to have the focus off of her – glad to have the moment to direct her thoughts inward as she takes a bite of her pie.

The taste of chocolate hits her tongue and El bites back a moan as the richness of the chocolate dances across her taste buds, followed soon by the buttery flakiness of the crust. And, for a moment, all the ambiguity of her love life feels very far away under the simple influence of sugar and cocoa.

She does need someone to talk to about this, though, someone who will listen and commiserate and help her figure out how to deal with this, how to move forward, *what* to do.

It’s a good thing, then, that she knows *exactly* who to talk to.

Will's apartment is very typical for an artist's loft: built in an older industrial building converted to apartments, it's all exposed brick, open concept floor plans, and high ceilings, walls decorated with art of all various styles and furniture as decorative as it is functional. When Will and Greg first moved in 4 years ago, the space had been impersonal, a blank canvas, and they've worked tirelessly to make it their own. It's beautiful and interesting and eclectic.

And yet, despite the countless times he's been to Will's apartment, Mike always manages to feel a little out of place, like he's a mismatched piece that doesn't belong. Yes, the feeling always fades after about half an hour or so, but it doesn't change the fact that, even though Mike loves Will like the brother he's never had, they have *very* different styles. Where Will's apartment is airy and exposed, Mike's townhouse, by contrast, is cozy, comfortable...almost snug.

Still, none of their differences in preferred architectural and interior design styles are going to keep Mike from visiting Will. And *especially* not on Thanksgiving.

Will and Greg have gotten to the point in their relationship where they alternate which holiday they spend with which family and, this year, it's Thanksgiving with Greg's family before Christmas with Will's. And Will's graciously invited Mike to spend Thanksgiving with them after hearing that Mike was planning on being on his own since Lucas and Dustin are both heading back to Hawkins for the long weekend.

Naturally, Mike gratefully accepted the invite. With both Nancy and Holly in New York – Nancy working for Time Magazine and Holly at her freshman year at Barnard College (of all the Wheeler siblings, Mike's convinced that Holly is the smartest of all of them) – Mike's parents are heading up to be with his sisters for the holiday. And Mike isn't about to haul his ass up there to spend a long weekend cooped up with his sisters, his parents, *and* his parents' failing relationship.

Karen and Ted Wheeler's marriage has been falling apart since long before Mike was aware of it, but he's known about it since he was

around 10 and, *somewhat*, his parents are still not divorced. Mike's not sure what the fuck is going on there since, now that Holly's out of the house, there's really no reason for his parents to keep up the charade. But he knows without a doubt that he isn't about to waste the precious long weekend pretending like his parents still love each other. He doesn't want to spend Thanksgiving alone, but it's a preferable alternative to spending it with his parents. Bad enough he's gonna spend Christmas with them.

So, *of course* Mike jumps at the chance to spend Thanksgiving with Will and Greg and Greg's family. Which is why he's standing in front of the front door to Will's apartment, wearing a nice jean-sweater combo, trying to figure out how to juggle two bottles of wine (one Sauv Blanc, one Pinot) so he can knock on the door. After a second, Mike decides on tucking the Pinot bottle against his body using the curve of his elbow and he reaches out to rap on Will's door with his knuckles.

Mike's a little early, he knows. It's just past noon and Will said they weren't going to be sitting down to dinner until closer to 5, but Mike also recognizes that he's intruding a bit on a family day and, well, maybe this way he can help out as a way to pay Will back.

The door opens a few minutes later and a smiling, apron-wearing Will Byers stands there, giving Mike a fondly exasperated look. "Hey, you're here, like, super early."

Mike grins and holds out both bottles of wine. "Yes, but I come bearing gifts: wine *and* my services as an extra pair of hands to help out with whatever needs to be done for dinner tonight."

Will lets out a laugh filled with the same amused exasperation that's painted on his face and reaches out to take the bottles of wine. "Well, as long as you're not volunteering to cook, sure, I'll welcome the help." Will looks at the wine as he steps aside to let Mike in. "And thanks for the wine. We'll have the Pinot with dinner, but I think I'm gonna crack open the Sauv Blanc *now*."

Mike grins as he closes the door behind him. "Stressful day?"

Will rolls his eyes and starts making his way through the apartment

to the kitchen that's off to one side. "Putting it mildly, yes. Cooking holiday meals for 10 people is just about the surest way to give me an anxiety attack. Not that anyone will *care* – Greg's family is about the most chill group of people I've ever met – but *I'll* know if something goes wrong and, well...."

"You're a perfectionist," Mike says, taking the still chilled bottle of white wine from Will's grip. "Here, I'll open this up and pour you a glass while you get back to whatever cooking you were in the middle of."

The laugh that Will lets out is a bit manic, but mostly relieved. "You're a saint, Michael Wheeler."

"Hey, tell my students that, will you?" Mike says he maneuvers through the open kitchen, stepping around Will to grab a couple of wine glasses and the corkscrew. "Finals are coming up and they're convinced I'm the devil."

"Ha, they'd think you were the devil no matter what you did," Will says. "This is just the way of high school students. You know this."

Mike laughs and, a few minutes later once two glasses of wine are poured, Mike sets himself to helping out with whatever needs to be done – fetching kitchen implements, setting the table, etc. – while Will chops and dices and mixes, getting all the side dishes prepped and ready to cook while the turkey is in the oven. The apartment smells like roasting turkey and onions and garlic and it's enough to make Mike's mouth water in anticipation of dinner.

"So, where's Greg?" Mike asks a bit later as the two take a break, eating a small lunch of a couple of hastily thrown together sandwiches.

"Oh, he and his family have this whole soccer game in the park tradition," Will says with a vague wave of his hand. "I volunteered to stay behind to cook dinner so I wouldn't have to embarrass myself by trying to be athletic. Plus, Candice never usually gets to participate in the game and she looked really excited that she had the chance to."

Mike frowns a bit. "Candice is Greg's mom, right?"

“Yep,” Will says around a bite of his sandwich. “Fantastic woman, always pressuring me and Greg for grandchildren even though, you know, gay.”

“You know, there’s this novel concept called ‘adoption’,” Mike says with a laugh. “You should look it up sometime.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Yes, thank you Mr. Encyclopedia. Not the point.” He sighs. “Besides, Greg has 3 younger sisters and all of them are straight, not to mention the older of the 3 is married and they’re planning on having their first kid in the next year or so. Hopefully, that’ll sate Candice’s grandchildren needs for a bit.”

“Heh, what about your mom?” Mike asks. “She pushing you for grandkids?”

“Thankfully, no,” Will says. “She’s too focused on Jonathan right now. She’s afraid he’s gonna die alone. Probably what she’s telling him right now.”

“Oh, god, that sounds like *my* mom,” Mike says with a roll of his eyes.

“Your mom bemoaning your lack of a girlfriend?” Will says, grinning.

“Well, Nancy’s also single,” Mike says. “And she’s fast approaching 35 which, as my mom continually points out, is the end of a woman’s prime baby-making years, so my mom’s doubly freaking out about having to wait until Holly’s a lot older for her first shot at grandkids.”

Will lets out a hum, a contemplative look creeping onto his face. “Hey, Nancy’s also in New York, right? Maybe we should set up our older siblings or something. Kill two birds with one stone, as it were.”

Mike laughs. “Didn’t Jonathan used to have the worst crush on Nancy before we moved?”

“Oh, the *worst*,” Will says with an emphatic nod. “Like, he never *said* anything, but it was super obvious.”

The buzzing of Mike’s phone in his pocket cuts off interrupts his train of thought and Mike gives Will an apologetic smile as he reaches for

his phone. “Sorry, it’s probably my mom, texting me about how much I’m missing out as a way to make me feel guilty.”

But it’s not. It’s El, texting him with a message that makes him laugh, his heart doing an excited, beat-skipping thump at her words flashing across his screen. *Highlights of my day so far: violated a turkey to insert stuffing and deftly maneuvered around a hectic household of family lamenting over my lack of a love life (apparently I’m going to ‘die alone’, which is everyone’s favorite phrase today, lol). Thank god for wine.*

Mike knows he’s grinning like a fool as he texts her back, but he doesn’t care. *How many glasses have you had? Also, that poor turkey. What did it do to have your hand stuck up its butt?*

El’s response is swift. *First of all: not its butt, the hole’s where the head used to be,* is the first text. *Second of all: I’m on glass number 3 and I will hear no judgment from the peanut gallery,* comes a few seconds later.

My apologies. No judgment here. Self-medicate as needed to survive. Just come back to me sane, is all I ask, Mike responds. When he hits send, there’s a quick moment of panic – is *come back to me* too much? – but it’s over in a flash and he finds himself eagerly awaiting El’s response, to see if she’ll acknowledge the sentiment.

“Wow, ok. Who is she?”

The sound of Will’s voice startles Mike, pulling him back to the here and now, and Mike feels his face heat up. God, he’d almost completely forgotten about Will and his heart gives a stuttering beat. “She? She, who?” Mike says, trying to deflect, to stall, but knowing it’s ultimately an exercise in futility.

Is he ready to talk about this? No. Is he going to have to? Yes, if the look on Will’s face is anything to go by – curious, fondly amused, almost excited.

“Please, don’t insult me,” Will says, giving Mike a flat look that doesn’t at all temper the curious excitement on his face. “I’ve known you since we were 6 and I can read you like an open book. You wear your heart on your sleeve and the look on your face, right now, is

your mooning face.” Will pauses, grinning. “You, Michael Wheeler, are falling in love.”

Will’s words have the effect of making Mike feel like he’s gone off the drop on a rollercoaster – stomach swooping, heart pounding, blood rushing in his ears. It’s not that he hasn’t thought about it, falling in love. Really, it’s almost scary how easy it’s been, falling for El the way that he has been, slowly and all at once at the same time – as easy as breathing, as natural as gravity, like he was always meant to be here, feeling about her the way that he does.

It’s just that it’s the first time he’s *hearing* the words out loud instead of in his head. And it makes him feel like he could just fly away, like he’s walking a tightrope with no safety net beneath him.

So, Mike lets out a shaky sigh. He knows he’s been caught and there’s no hiding it anymore. “That obvious, huh?” he says, smiling softly, shyly.

“The most obvious,” Will says, grin fading to a soft smile as he leans forward and props his elbow up on the table they’re sitting at, face resting in his cupped palm. “So? Tell me about her.” Mike’s gut twists at the thought. What should he say? How much is *too* much?

Mike knows he’s giving away what he’s thinking by the way that Will sighs. “Hey, if it helps, you don’t have to give me details, ok? I know you get weird about stuff like this sometimes.”

It’s true and Mike can’t help the wave of gratitude that rushes through him. He doesn’t mean to be a private person, but given how easy he is to read by his best friends (and how fucking *nosy* they are), keeping some of the details private is the only way Mike can feel like he has some measure of control. “Thanks, Will.”

Will shakes his head, but he’s still smiling. “Don’t mention it,” he says before lightly punching Mike on the arm. “So, spill it, Wheeler. Who’s this woman who has you all lovesick and besotted?”

Mike gulps and nervousness mixes with the butterflies that seem to have taken permanent residence in his stomach. “So, uh, you know that woman teacher Dustin’s always teasing me about?” Mike asks,

hoping that Will picks up on the thread he's laying down.

And, thankfully, Will does, gasping a bit, smiling conspiratorially like the secret shameful gossip that he is. "No," he breathes. "Really? Her?"

Mike bites his lip and nods, breathing deeply to try and calm the pounding of his heart. "Yeah, it's her."

"God, Dustin's never going to let you live this down," Will says with a snort.

Suffused with a quick flash of panic, Mike reaches out and claps a hand on Will's forearm. "You *can't* say anything to Dustin and Lucas. Please, I'm just...I'm not ready, ok? I'm still trying to figure out what to do about all of this. I don't – I just...." Mike gulps, unable to put his feelings into words. He just wants space, though, space and time to figure out how to navigate this new reality, one where he's irrevocably and undeniably falling in love with El Hopper (if he hasn't already finished falling, that is – though Mike thinks that El might be the kind of woman you never finish falling in love with). Mike doesn't know, though, if he's strong enough to put up with his friends' teasing while he's trying to figure himself out.

"Hey, yeah, of course," Will says. "This is new for you, I know. God, I don't even think I ever saw you like this with Kristen and I was half convinced you were going to marry that girl."

Yes, Kristen Briggs, Mike's last girlfriend. They'd met while he was getting his Master's in Teaching and they dated for 2 years before they realized it really wasn't working. Sure, they loved and cared about each other, but they weren't *in* love with each other. Mike could have married her and been happy, he thinks. But it wouldn't have been fair to either of them in the end.

It's been three years since he and Kristen broke up and there's definitely a part of him that misses being in a relationship – having someone to talk to at the end of the day or to cuddle with on the couch, having someone in his corner like that, having someone he can kiss and hold and make love to...all things he wants so badly to have with El, so bad he can almost taste it. Even more so, Mike

knows Will's right. What Mike feels for El makes how he felt for Kristen pale by comparison.

"I *really* like her, Will," Mike says, voice hushed as his thoughts flood with all things *El* – the way she laughs, the curve of her smile, her quick wit and gentle compassion, the stunning ease of her beauty... the way she looks at him, eyes boldly meeting his or demurely teasing or just sparkling with happiness, like she doesn't want to look away. God, he never wants this to end, the way he feels about her, the way he can't stop thinking about her.

"Tell me about her," Will says, his voice equally as quiet.

For a moment, Mike doesn't know *where* to start. But then he opens his mouth and finds that the words are just there, waiting to be spoken. "She's one of the best people I've ever met," Mike says. "She's so good with the students. I watch her talk with them, give them advice, console them, and I marvel at her patience. And she wants to help them so badly. Like, for this dance that we're helping to plan, her driving force is making sure that the kids have a good time and no one can doubt how important it is for her." Mike takes a breath, letting out a laugh before he resumes, words picking up speed with each passing second. "She knows the difference between Marvel and DC, she loves science fiction, and she can quote Star Wars. She makes me laugh, makes me want to do whatever it takes to make *her* laugh, but she's also the best listener I've ever met. I can talk to her for hours and never run out of things to say. And she's just about the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, like jaw-droppingly gorgeous and stunning and...." Mike stops, trailing off as he tries to catch his breath. "I think I could love her for the rest of my life. And I have no idea what to do about it."

Will's looking at him with a soft smile, face gentle and sympathetic. "Does she feel the same, do you think?"

"Sometimes, I think yes, and other times, I'm not sure," Mike says, gulping. "I just...I'm afraid I could be reading more into what's her just being nice and I don't want to jeopardize my friendship with her by confessing my feelings and being horribly wrong. I just...I need to be sure before I do anything."

“Well, fortune favors the brave, Mike,” Will says, shrugging one shoulder lazily. “Eventually, you’re going to have to make a move or risk missing out altogether.” He pauses and breathes out a soft laugh. “Still, I’m happy for you. She sounds amazing and I hope it works out for you.”

Mike looks down at his phone, unlocking it to see El’s most recent text message – *I make no promises on the sane, but I'll always come back* – and his heart skips a beat, hope welling up in his chest and making his skin tingle with possibility. “I hope it does, too,” Mike says, the words almost whispered. He lets his eyes linger on El’s last text message before he shakes his head to try and clear the fog of emotion that’s come over him. “Anyway, we should probably get back to making dinner, yeah?”

If there’s an edge of desperation in Mike’s voice, a desire to stop talking about his potential love life, Will makes no mention of it as he nods. “Yeah, probably. C’mon, kitchen assistant. Let’s clean up our lunch and get cracking on the rest of this.”

Mike dutifully follows as Will gets up and heads back to the kitchen. But, the entire time – the rest of the day, really – Mike can’t stop thinking about El, about if she feels for him the same way he feels for her. He realizes with a thought that makes his throat feel too tight, his breath feel too short, that he can’t *wait* to figure it out.

And he hopes – *oh*, how he hopes.

The sigh of relief that escapes from El’s lips as she closes the door to her brownstone behind her would have been embarrassing if anyone were here to hear it. As it is, she’s just so relieved that she’s home, back in Chicago...and away from a family that is Way Too Concerned about her love life...or lack thereof, rather.

It’s been three days of “El, honey, I just want you to be happy” and “Ellie, you’re my best hope for grandchildren” and “Jane Eleanor Hopper, when am I going to be a great-grandmother?” and (El’s

personal favorite) “You know, honey, if you wait too long, the boys aren’t going to want you anymore.”

*Side note, remind Dad **not** to invite Aunt Christine to any more holiday gatherings.*

So, yeah, El’s happy, *really* happy, to be back home in Chicago where she doesn’t have to face endless interrogations and polite concern about why she’s not married and popping out babies yet.

And it hadn’t helped that, every time anyone mentioned her settling down, El’s mind *immediately* went to Mike and her thoughts would fill with visions of the two of them together – dating, getting married, having a family, settling down in domestic bliss....

Hell, she ended up being so distracted by thoughts of Mike all weekend that even her *dad* noticed. And Hop has the emotional awareness of a fruit bat.

“Honey, have you met someone? It’s just, every time someone mentions something about you finding a guy, you get this...*look on your face*,” he’d said after dinner when El pulled him away from the football game playing for a post-meal walk. El couldn’t lie, so she told him about Mike, about the huge crush she has on him, about how she’s 100% sure it’s *more* than a crush...and about how she thinks he might feel the same way about her.

“Well, you won’t know unless you try,” Hop had said. “Which means you need to talk to him. I know you haven’t had, let’s say, the *best* luck with the opposite sex-” (at which point she’d interjected with a wry “Gee, thanks Dad”) “-but this guy sounds like he might be one of the good ones and, well, you deserve to be happy.”

El knows her dad has a point – hell, it’s not like she hasn’t had similar thoughts over the past several weeks or so – but she doesn’t know *how* to talk to Mike about this, how to open up about her feelings in a way that makes her feel like she’s not exposing herself. Because part of her is scared that she’s going to confess her feelings... and Mike’s going to tell her that he was just being nice and he doesn’t feel anything more than friendship for her. So she needs to figure out a way to test the waters, as it were, to do something without

exposing everything. But she can't figure out *how*.

What I need is advice and I need it now.

Motivated by that thought, El moves away from her front door and piles her stuff just inside the foyer before she fishes in her purse for her phone. Phone in hand, El finds herself navigating to her text messages out of habit and, naturally, the last person she texted was Mike.

Heart leaping into her throat, El scrolls up through the texts she and Mike have exchanged over the past few days. Most of them are innocuous – how their day is going, random funny things they wanted to share with each other – but some are not.

Our café doesn't seem the same without you anymore. Thanks for ruining it for me ;), reads one from yesterday, Mike at the Windy Café on his usual Saturday. It's a routine El has picked up as well and she's been meeting up with him every Saturday since that first time she ran into him. They spend most of their time together there talking, but they also find themselves enjoying the quiet presence of the other's company, Mike writing his next novel and El reading whatever book she's in the middle of. It's quickly become the highlight of El's week and she couldn't help the way her breath had caught when she read the text from Mike yesterday.

But, as she's been doing the past few days, El scrolls up to the short message that's been the sole source of the buoyant hope that's sprung up inside of her: *Just come back to me sane, is all I ask.*

Just come back to me, El's brain echoes, her heart pounding at the sentiment, a small smile pulling up the corners of her lips and making her feel like a lovesick fool. What did he mean by that? Did he mean it as fondly as El read it to be?

Closing her eyes, El shakes her head to clear the thoughts and spiraling self-doubt that's creeping in. Her fingers dance across the screen as she types out a quick text message to Mike – *I survived the hell that is family during the holidays. Home sweet home, Chicago.* – before she closes her text app and pulls up her contacts.

A couple of seconds later, the phone is ringing and, even though El feels her phone buzz with an incoming text message probably from Mike (*Glad you're back. City's too quiet without you in it*, is what El will read in about 10 minutes), El keeps her phone pressed to her ear.

"Hey, Ellie." Max's voice comes through the ear piece after the third ring.

El sighs, feeling her ribcage relax as some of the tension begins to bleed from her, but her heart's pounding in her chest and she feels a little breathless. "Hey, Maxie," El says. "You back in Chicago? I was wondering if you wanted to go grab dinner. I could use some advice and, well, you know, you're my best friend, so who better to ask?"

Max lets out a soft laugh. "Yeah, got back a few hours ago. Everything ok? You sound...a little panicked."

"Oh, you know," El says, laughing a bit, the sound slightly manic. "I seem to have fallen in love with my coworker and I don't know what to do about it." The words hang heavy in the air and El feels them in a way she never quite has before. She's *in love* and it's the most overwhelming feeling in the world.

There's a long pause before Max speaks. "Ok, do you need comfort food? Or alcohol?"

"Um...both?"

"Say no more," Max says. "I will be over at your place in an hour, ok? Just get settled in, change into your pjs, and I'll handle the rest."

A little over an hour later, with El dressed in flannel PJ pants and a thin, grey thermal, there's a knock at her front door and El opens up to see Max standing there, arms laden with takeout bags, a pizza box in one hand, with both a six-pack of beer *and* a bottle of El's favorite red wine by her feet. "Hey girlie, give me a hand, will ya?" Max says in lieu of a greeting.

El's jaw drops as she bends to grab the alcohol from by Max's feet. "Holy shit, Max, are you trying to feed a small army?"

"Didn't know what you wanted, so I got lots of stuff," Max says as she

pushes past El and walks inside. El closes the door and follows Max as she navigates to the kitchen. “I got mac and cheese, an order of onion rings, jalapeño poppers – which are mainly for me, though you’re welcome to have some – a couple of cheeseburgers, and I called an order in for a deep dish pizza from Giordano’s. What we don’t eat, we can split and save for leftovers.”

The smell of fried food hits El’s nose and her stomach growls something fierce. “Well, let me get some plates and glasses and stuff.”

Soon, they’re both sitting on El’s couch, each with a plate laden with food and a drink on the coffee table, a beer for Max and a glass of red wine for El.

“Right, spill it, girlie,” Max says around a mouthful of jalapeño popper. “You’re in love with your coworker? Is this the same guy you think is cute? That you’re working with on that winter dance thing?”

El nods and waits until she’s swallowed her bite of mac and cheese before she speaks. “Yeah, same guy.” El pauses, letting out a shaky sigh. “God, Max, I don’t know what to do,” she says, her voice rising in pitch as panic begins to take over. She’s aware that she’s trembling and that her throat feels tight, but there’s nothing she can do about it.

“Hey, alright, calm down,” Max says, reaching over to place a soothing hand on El’s knee. “Breathe, take a sip of wine, and tell me everything, ok? Start from the beginning if you have to.”

And, so, El does. While they eat, El tells Max about how she and Mike have been hanging out and getting closer, how it’s been to work with him on being faculty supervisors for the Winter Ball, how they keep running into each other at work, how they’ve been texting almost nonstop for a few weeks now...how some of the things he says to her make her heart skip a beat or cause her to flush or fill her with such bright hope, she fears she might explode into a flurry of butterflies. She tells Max almost everything, omitting only that Mike is something of a famous author, and, when she’s done, she looks over at Max, who’s staring back with a slightly taken aback look on her face.

“Oh, honey,” Max says after a moment, her words soft and soothing. “You’ve gotten yourself all tangled up in everything, haven’t you?”

El cringes and takes a sip of her wine, her second glass of the night. “That bad, huh?” El looks down, unable to meet Max’s gaze, acute embarrassment bubbling in her stomach.

“No, no, not bad,” Max says with a soft giggle that has El looking back up at her best friend. “Just...I’ve never heard you talk about a guy like this. And I’m proud that you seem to have fallen in love with someone who’s *not* a complete loser, unlike the kind of guys you usually end up with.”

El frowns. “Hey, no throwing my horrible dating history in my face. And, yes, Mike’s a good guy, a *really* good guy.” She pauses, sighing. “He’s so nice, Max. Nice and funny and such a good teacher. He makes me laugh and goes out of his way to talk to me and we have the *best* conversations. I could listen to him talk all day and not get bored.”

“And you think he’s super cute,” Max says, grinning, before she lets out another giggle. “You’ve fallen hard, my dear.”

El nods, breathing deep, and her heart races in her chest at hearing it confirmed for her: she, El Hopper, has fallen in love with one Mike Wheeler. God, it feels *fantastic*, like she can do anything, like she’s going to fly away and untether completely from gravity.

And yet, at the same time, a frisson of fear ripples down her spine. What if he doesn’t feel the same? What if she screws this up? What if it doesn’t work out? What if it ruins everything?

“Oh no,” Max says. “You have doubting face going on over there. What gives?”

El gulps. “I just...what do I do, Max? I don’t know how to move forward. Mike’s my friend, and I hope something more, but he’s also my coworker. What if I’m misreading the signals he’s sending and he only thinks of me as a friend? What if I mess this up? I have to be in the same building as him 5 days a week, Max. I don’t know if I can handle fucking this up.” By the end of her mini-monologue, El’s

words are practically tripping over each other and she can scarcely catch her breath. Her blood fizzles with fear and panic and it makes her skin feel tingly in all the wrong ways.

"Whoa, ok," Max hurries to say, holding out her hands in a calming gesture. "You're jumping the gun a bit. It sounds like he might feel the same way, yeah? Like, I know you have the worst dating history, but you're not *that* bad at reading people. Odds are, if you think you're getting signals from him, you probably are."

El's lower lip begins to tremble and she bites the inside of her cheek to keep herself in check. "You think?"

Max nods. "I do."

"Then what do I *do*?" El says and she cringes at the whine she can hear in her own voice. "I just...I need to do something about this but I don't know *what*. It's becoming unbearable, Max and I just...something needs to change. I *want* something to change." El wants to look at Mike and *not* wonder what it's like to hold his hand, to snuggle up against his side...to *kiss* him, to feel his lips against hers. She wants to know that she's the first thing he thinks about when he wakes up and the last thought he has before he falls asleep....

El wants to know if Mike's fallen in love her like she's fallen in love with him.

Max bites her lip, brow furrowing, as she thinks. And then, a few seconds later, her eyes light up and she's clearly fighting grinning like an idiot. "I have an idea."

Suspicion wars with hope inside El's chest. "Should I be scared? I feel like I should be scared."

"You have that dance in a couple of weeks, right? The one you're chaperoning? And Mike, he's chaperoning it with you?"

El arches an eyebrow and she crosses her arms over her chest. "Yeah, what of it?" she asks, trying to keep her face carefully neutral. Truth be told, El's excited to be going to a high school dance, even if she is chaperoning it. She never went to any of her high school dances – too

busy with ballet – so she's excited to see what it's all about, if it lives up to what the movies say it is.

"You should ask him to dance. Wait for a romantic slow song and ask him to dance. When you do, tell him you've thought a lot about it, dancing with him. You don't have to reveal your undying love for him, or anything, but how he reacts when you ask and while you're dancing should give you a clue to how he feels about you. And then just...take it from there. Do what feels natural – don't overthink it."

El can see the picture Max is painting – both her and Mike dressed nicely, her asking him to dance, him nervously accepting, her hands around his neck while he places his on her waist, their bodies swaying...El shivers, her heart pounding in her chest, and she craves that reality so badly, she can taste it.

And, even better, she feels like it could maybe, *actually* happen.

So, El smiles over at Max, hope exploding in her veins, and she sighs. "Max, I love you. You're a genius."

Max scoffs, but she's smiling. "Well, of course I am. But you have to promise to tell me how it goes, ok? *Especially* if goes really well. Like 'one of you goes home with the other' well."

El rolls her eyes and tries not to laugh. "Ok, yeah, *that's* not going to happen," El says, giving Max a look.

Max pouts, but El can tell she's still amused. "Well, you can't fault me for trying. I'm still horribly single so I gotta live vicariously through you." She grins, eyebrows waggling. "Besides, you never know. You could be so overwhelmed with feelings that you *do* take him home or let him take you home so you can *ravish* each other and be horribly in love and schmoopy and all that stuff that happens after a wonderful first date."

El sighs, even though her stomach is doing heart-soaring and skin tingling swoops at the thought of her and Mike 'ravishing each other' (and god, she hopes she gets the opportunity to experience that). "Right, well, this isn't a date, so you don't need to worry about it. And even if it was, I'm not the 'sex on a first date' kind of woman.

That's never going to happen. *Never.*"

(*spoiler alert: that's exactly what happens.*)

School starts back up after Thanksgiving and all feels right in Mike's world again now that El's back in Chicago – back to *him*. He'd spent the entire long weekend missing El terribly, despite there being no *official* reason to miss her. He only has a crush on her – it's not like they're *promised* to each other, or anything.

(Though, Mike totally *would not* mind being promised to her, now that he's thinking about it.)

The way his heart skips a beat when he gets her text that she's back in Chicago makes him feel a little light-headed and he knows, in this moment, that he really needs to do something about these feelings he has for her. Because if Mike doesn't do something soon (and what, he doesn't know yet), he's liable to explode or something else equally tragic.

It's a chilly Monday morning when Mike heads back in through the front doors of St. Ignatius and he can't help the detour he takes to swing by El's office, his whole body lighting up with eagerness when he spots her open door.

El's sitting at her desk, booting up her computer, as Mike peers inside. He takes a moment to look at her, a moment that he wishes he could stretch into eternity, and he swears he falls even more in love with her.

El's sitting there, wearing a pretty, cream colored satin blouse, the top couple buttons undone to show just the barest hint of cleavage (still tasteful, all things considered), and her hair is down, left to spill freely down her shoulders. She lifts a hand to tug at her earring, a simple stud of some kind, and Mike can't help the way his eyes travel down the sweep of her neck, across the fullness of her lips and the soft, pink flush of her cheeks. If she's wearing makeup, Mike can't

tell, but he knows El is breathtakingly beautiful with or *without* makeup.

Mike's heart clenches painfully in his chest at the sight of her, overwhelmed by her beauty, struck by how he never wants to look away.

But there's only so long Mike can stand there without drifting too close to creeper territory, so he clears his throat, unable to keep from grinning.

El looks up at the sound of his voice and the way her whole face lights up – eyes sparkling, smile so, *so* bright it could outshine the sun – makes Mike's chest fill with butterflies.

Oh, wow....

"Hey, there!" El says, excitement deepening the flush on her cheeks. She stands as Mike takes a step into her office, just far enough so that he can lean against the doorjamb with his shoulder, arms crossed over his chest over the jacket he's wearing.

"Hey," Mike says, smile still firmly fixed on his face, voice going almost gentle as it pitches downward. "Just had to see for myself that you made it back alright."

El gives an exaggerated roll of her eyes that has Mike chuckling as she stops next to the edge of her desk and leans against, one hip propped up on the surface. She mirrors his stance, arms loosely crossed over her chest, and Mike gulps as he gives her a once over, eyes instinctually drinking her in. El's arms crossing over her chest only accentuates the shadow of cleavage he can see along the unbuttoned neckline of her blouse, the fabric pulling tight across her breasts as it shimmers beneath the fluorescent lights above. She's paired the blouse with a form-fitting, knee-length black skirt and thin, high heels. Mike can barely drag his gaze away from her legs, narrow skirt pulled taut over toned thighs, one knee alluringly bent from how she's leaning against the desk, shapely calves and delicate ankles exposed....

Mike likes to consider himself a good guy, a guy who treats women

with respect and doesn't objectify them. But he's also a red-blooded, mostly heterosexual male and it's been *way* longer than he likes to think about since he's last had sex. It doesn't help that El Hopper is a stunningly beautiful woman, a woman who he is *unbelievably* attracted to. So, with the way she's sitting...yeah, *of course* he has a hard time looking away from her legs.

(god, he **dreams** about her legs, about running his hands along the length of them, skin soft and warm beneath his palms; about how they would feel wrapped around his waist, her heels digging into his back; about kissing his way up them, hearing her gasp and moan as his mouth glides first up her calves, then her knees, and finally up her thighs before going higher still.

*he doesn't dream **only** about her legs, but they do feature **very** heavily in those dreams, dreams that drive him to take a cold shower more often than not, dreams that have him fighting a blush whenever he looks at her...dreams that leave him wanting, **craving** to know what it's like to be with her so intimately, to feel her skin against his.)*

"Well, I promised I'd come back," El says. "And I *always* keep my promises."

Mike lets out a laugh and does his best to ignore the steady thrum of desire that beats in his veins. "Hey, if you don't have your integrity, then *what* do you have?" he teases.

"Exactly," El grins. She uncrosses her arms and braces one palm against her desk. "Besides, if I didn't come back, I'd have to kill my aunt."

"That bad, huh?" Mike says with a sympathetic cringe.

"Let's just say, thank god she's not going to be there for Christmas," El says with an arched eyebrow.

Mike laughs. "She sounds like a character. Anyway," he says with a sigh. "I just wanted to stop in and say hi. I should probably go and get settled in for today's classes." But just the thought of walking away, of not being in the same room as El, makes his shoulders slump a bit. It feels like his feet are filled with concrete, he's so unwilling to

part from her company. God, he just wants to always be near her.

“Hey, what are you doing for lunch today?” Mike asks before he’s even fully aware of having the thought.

El arches an eyebrow, hopeful amusement playing across her face, and Mike’s heart leaps into his throat. “Why do you ask?”

Mike forces himself to push past the nervousness and he shrugs, trying his best to come across as casual, cool. “Was wondering if you wanted some company. I know you tend to eat in here, but....” Mike trails off leadingly and he shrugs again.

El smiles and breathes out a laugh, a high-pitched, breathy giggle that sounds like music to Mike’s ears. “Well, you’re welcome to join me in here, if you want. I do want to be available for the students if they have any questions, but they rarely seem to come to me during the lunch block. So it should be quiet in here – quieter than the teacher’s lounge, at any rate.”

It’s a date, then, Mike thinks and barely keeps from saying. “Cool, alright, sounds good. See you in a few hours, then?” Mike says, fighting off a cringe. God, please let him not sound as desperately hopeful as he thinks he does.

“Looking forward to it,” El says, giggling and smiling coyly, her cheeks flushing prettily, and Mike feels like he just won the lottery or something with how ecstatic he is right in this moment.

Lunch with El ends up being the absolute highlight of his day – *any* moment with El is the highlight, to be honest. The hour they spend eating flies by with smooth conversation and easy laughter, gently teasing and blatantly flirtatious as they sit next to each other on the small couch tucked up against the back corner of her office, bodies turned so that they’re facing each other, inches apart.

Mike never wants this to end. If he could be in the same room as El, next to her for the rest of his life, it would *still* not be long enough.

So he spends most of lunch either trying not to trip over his own words with the sheer elation of just being with her, or just watching

her speak with rapt attention. Mike's endlessly fascinated by the way El's face lights up, animated by whatever story she's telling with hands that gesture expressively. But he also can't get enough of the way she laughs at his jokes and clever quips, leaning forward like she's hanging on his every word. It's exciting and thrilling and *mesmerizing* and Mike knows he'll never be able to get enough.

And, yet, bafflingly, as much as being around El excites him, it's also soothing, calming – just *right* in a way that nothing else has ever felt like before.

It's strange, Mike thinks, how El manages to both energize and relax him all at the same time, but he has a feeling that this is one of those things where logic just doesn't apply.

After all, matters of the heart are *never* logical.

Mike leaves lunch feeling like he's on top of the world. But he wants more than just lunch with El or meeting up at their café every Saturday. He wants *everything* – dating, holding her hand, getting to kiss her, to love her, to be with her – and he has no idea how to get there. Hell, he's not even sure El feels the same way about him that he does about her. Mike's pretty sure she does – all the flirting and the touching and the sheer chemistry between them can't be for *nothing* – but “pretty sure” isn't good enough. Mike's not brave enough to put himself out there for “pretty sure”. No, he needs *proof*, something concrete, something more than his gut feel on this one.

But how to get it?

Confused, but hopeful, Mike spends the next week carefully scrutinizing every interaction he has with El, as well as how she interacts with other people. He has lunch with her every day and can't help but seem to run into her every time he goes into the teacher's lounge, so he has plenty of opportunities to see her with their fellow teachers, to see how she interacts with them.

The problem, though, is that El's just so goddamn nice to everyone. She always has a bright smile for everyone or a kind word or is just willing to listen and be there for people. Maybe she's just being extra nice to him, maybe all those signals are just how she treats her close

friends – the touching, the teasing, the coy smiles and flirty glances.

Or, in Mike's more desperate moments, he thinks that maybe she's *humoring* him by being so nice and flirty with him. *Oh, there goes Mike Wheeler, such a dork. I'll toss him a bone, take pity on him.* The thought never fails to sour his stomach with disappointment, making his throat tighten and his limbs go a little numb.

Cooler heads always prevails, though, and Mike reassures himself that, no, El's not just humoring him. She's not petty like that; El's genuine in a way that Mike's rarely seen in anyone before and he knows she wouldn't toy with him like that.

He's still at Square One, though, and a week of careful observation has gotten him no closer to a definitive answer to the question of whether El returns his feelings or not.

The answer, as is usually the case with him, comes from the last place Mike would expect it.

It's the Tuesday before the Winter Ball, a chilly December day in Chicago, and Mike finds himself with an unexpected free 2nd block. The entirety of the junior class is out volunteering at a food pantry today, something he *completely* forgot about. And, since Mike's Honors Chem class is all juniors except for 3 sophomores, he decides to give the sophomores a free period before shooing them out of his classroom.

So, now he's sitting in the teacher's lounge, slowly drinking a cup of coffee as he scrolls through his Tumblr feed, and generally just relaxing before his Physics class. He'd walked past El's office on his way over, excited and hoping to spend some time with her, wanting to see her adorably surprised smile and hear the way her voice goes soft and fond when she talks to him. But she'd been in there with a student, so he kept on walking, not wanting to disturb her when she was doing her job.

It's ok, though. He'll see her during lunch in a little while, so no major loss, or anything.

About 20 minutes in Mike's unplanned free period, the door opens

and Mike looks up to see Mick Barnes walking into the room. The older man gives him a broad smile as he heads for the carafe of coffee on the counter. “Mike, my good man, don’t usually see you in here this time of day.”

Mike shrugs and puts his phone down, turning so he can better face Mick. “Juniors are out volunteering today, so I cancelled my Honors Chem class. Not worth teaching just the three sophomores I had left.”

“Yes, I have a similar situation with my British Lit section this afternoon during 8th block. I’m considering just going home early,” Mick says as he prepares himself a mug of coffee.

“I have no such luck,” Mike says, letting out a soft, envious sigh. “Physics lab this afternoon until 3:30.”

“You science teachers and your labs,” Mick says as he turns and leans on the counter, mug cradled in one hand. “You couldn’t pay me enough money to get back in a room with a Bunsen burner.”

“Aww, c’mon, it’s not *that* bad,” Mike says with a grin, teasing the older man just a bit. “You totally failed Chemistry, didn’t you?”

Mick levels a look at him. “Mike, I am man of letters, of heart and soul, of *passion*. Science is too dry, too...heartless.” Mike just looks back at him, eyebrow raised, not saying a word until the silence that follows Mick’s words breaks as the older man sighs. “Yes, fine, I failed high school Chemistry. Not my proudest moment, I’ll have you know.”

“Ha, I knew it!” Mike says, crowing victoriously.

Mike has more teasing words for the older man, but the door to the teacher’s lounge opens before Mike can say them. He turns just in time to see El walk in through the door and, suddenly, Mick Barnes’ horrible science record is the *furthest* thing from Mike’s mind.

El’s beautiful as usual today, wearing charcoal grey slacks and a pale pink sweater that clings deliciously to the curves of her body and looks so soft to the touch, Mike’s hands practically itch to find out if it is indeed as soft as it looks. Her hair’s up in a neat ponytail and

Mike can't help but stare at the way her ponytail sways and bobs. Because El's humming under her breath, head bobbing and bopping along to whatever song she's singing, almost dancing as she walks.

It's just about the cutest thing Mike's ever seen and he can't help the stupid grin that crosses his face, one that El echoes as she spots him, lips curling up in a smile.

"What are you singing?" Mike asks, breathing out a laugh. The tune's almost familiar, but Mike's never been the best at keeping up with music.

"You don't recognize it?" El asks, grinning, one eyebrow arching teasingly.

"Wouldn't have asked if I did," Mike shoots back, his own brows rising up towards his hairline.

El holds up the mouth of her water bottle to her lips – presumably she's come to the teacher's lounge to refill it – and, using it as a mock microphone, starts to sing, her voice clear and beautiful and *holy shit*, she has an amazing voice. And the words she sings? "Say my name, say my name, if no one is around you, say baby I love you, if you ain't running game." She pauses, looking at him expectantly, like she's waiting for him to recognize the song.

But Mike's too busy trying to calm the pounding of his heart. *Say baby I love you*. He knows she wasn't actually saying those words to him, but he can imagine, so easily imagine, and it causes an almost overwhelming surge of emotion to swell in his chest.

Still, El's looking at him, waiting for some reaction besides staring at her dumbly, so he shakes his head to clear his thoughts and grins wryly at her. "Sorry, I don't recognize the song."

It's like he might as well have shot El's dog, or something, based off the way she reacts to his words: shocked gasp, free hand coming to press over her heart, wounded expression crossing her face. "You don't recognize Destiny's Child?" El says, voice hushed. "The birthplace of Beyoncé's career? The singers of such hits as 'Survivor' and 'Jumpin', Jumpin'?"

Mike shrugs, still grinning his wry, apologetic grin. “Sorry?” he says, cringing a little.

“Ugh, you’re *killing* me, Smalls,” El says, sighing at him sadly, even though she’s smiling at him with a small, teasing grin.

Mike huffs out a laugh. “Ok, *that* reference I know,” he says.

“And yet, you have no knowledge of one of the premiere R&B girl groups of the 90s,” El says, shaking her head. “For *shame*.” She pauses, sighing again. “Well, we’re just going to have to fix this.”

“Oh, are we?” Mike asks as he watches El go over to the water filter to refill her water bottle.

“Yes. You, Michael Wheeler, are in dire need of a musical education. And, luckily,” El says as she turns around. “I am incredibly qualified to be the one to usher you into enlightenment.”

“I don’t know, will there be private tutoring sessions?” Mike asks, jokingly, eyebrows wagging with exaggerated innuendo.

But, instead of laughing like he expects, El just winks at him as she caps her water bottle, lips pulling up in a sly grin. “If you play your cards right,” she says, voice sultry and flirty, before she starts to walk towards the door. “See you later for lunch,” she says before she saunters out the door, leaving a flustered and flummoxed Mike in her wake. God, he thinks he might have just forgotten how to breathe, he’s so blown away. His heart pounds furiously in his chest, his skin feels way too tight, blood suffused with the heat of desire.

“If you are not actively pursuing that woman, you are the biggest fool on the face of the planet.”

Mick’s voice startles Mike back to awareness and, *holy shit*, he completely forgot Mick was there. God, how does El manage to make him forget the rest of the world exists all the goddamn time? “Excuse me?” Mike asks as he turns back to Mick.

“I have never seen a woman flirt with a man harder in my entire life,” Mick says, looking at Mike with wry amusement, lips stretched in a smirk, brows raised suggestively. “She was practically inviting

you in for ‘coffee’ after a first date.”

“You know, I’ve never understood why people use that euphemism,” Mike murmurs almost as an aside, trying to ignore the way his body reacts at the thought of El inviting him in for *that*. “If you want to sleep with someone, just come out and say it.”

“Besides the point,” Mick says. “Just tell me that you reciprocate her feelings. For the sake of our gender, please, just tell me.”

“Wait, you think she’s throwing herself at me? That she likes me like that?” Mike asks, unwilling to let go of what Mick’s hinting at. (The fact that Mike has feelings for El feels like such a forgone conclusion, that it’s almost not worth mentioning.) Because hope’s blossoming in his chest, heart racing with the implications, and he *needs* to make sure he’s hearing this right.

“The only way she could be more obvious is if she grabbed you and kissed you during Assembly in front of the whole school,” Mick says. “Now, do you like her like that, or not?”

But Mike doesn’t answer. He’s too giddy, too *ecstatic*. Because here’s the proof he’s been looking for, proof that he’s not just seeing things or imagining the way he and El have been flirting. *Because someone else noticed it too.*

Mike stands up and goes over to Mick, grabbing the older man by the shoulders and give him a firm shake while Mick looks back at him, face frozen in a comically panicked expression. “Mick, you’re the best and don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise.”

And, with that, Mike turns and, scooping up his coffee mug from the table, walks jauntily out of the teacher’s lounge. Because it’s true: El likes him. She *really* likes him. Now all Mike needs to do is figure out what to do about it.

Luckily, though, he has an idea.

The days after El comes back from Thanksgiving pass by in a blur of work and dance rehearsals. The first performance of The Nutcracker is the night before St. Ignatius' Winter Ball and it's all hands on deck every night after work, rehearsing over and over, spending long hours getting fitted for costumes, hoping and praying that all the seats sell and the performances go off without a hitch.

The only break in El's new routine, it seems, is Mike – having lunch with her every day, texting back and forth non-stop, popping in to her office to say hi in between classes, smiling at her when she returns the favor at the end of the day, huddling like co-conspirators during dance committee meetings. It's like Mike is slowly filling all the nooks and crannies of her life, weaving into all the empty spaces, until El's not entirely sure if she'll ever be able untangle herself from him.

They're not even dating and, already, El's life and heart are already irrevocably connected to Mike.

...*God*, her plan for the Winter Ball on Saturday *really* needs to work.

The sentiment is especially poignant as she walks into the classroom where the last dance committee meeting is taking place. Everything's arranged – ballroom at a downtown hotel booked, DJ arranged, decorations bought and paid for – now all that needs to be done is to figure out who's doing what to help with the setup on Saturday. El knows she needs to be there regardless of what duties she ends up assuming.

She also knows she's going to be *late* to help with the setup, which starts at 4 PM, because Saturday is *also* the same day as the family showing for The Nutcracker, a matinee performance where the crowd will be filled with kids and their parents, probably also a few school trips. Which means that there's going to be a lot of noise coming from the audience. El hopes it won't be *too* distracting, but she's performed in worse conditions and she's nothing if not a consummate professional when it comes to being on stage.

Which is also why there's a part of her that's frustrated at having to attend this last dance committee meeting. Because even though it's a great excuse to spend an hour in Mike's company, El's going to be

late for the second-to-last dress rehearsal.

Yeah, Gemma's going to love this, El thinks, picturing the perturbed look on the company's Director's face when El will show up 45 minutes late.

"Hey, you ok?"

The sound of Mike's voice startles El out of the problems swirling in her own head and she looks over to see Mike sitting down in his usual seat right next to hers. El shakes her head a bit to clear her thoughts and gives Mike a smile that she knows is a little tight. "Yeah, yeah, everything's fine. Just...a little frazzled, you know? Got a lot going on." She's told Mike a lot about her extra-long hours these past several days, so El's grateful when Mike doesn't ask for an explanation.

But it doesn't stop her heart from skipping a beat from the sight of the soft, sympathetic smile Mike's flashing in her direction. "Probably can't wait for The Nutcracker to be over, huh?"

El lets out a groan that would have been indecent if it weren't tinged with so much exhaustion. "You have no idea," she says, slumping a bit. "I'm *tired*."

Mike frowns, eyebrows arching downward. "You gonna be ok to help out during the dance on Saturday?"

El straightens up and nods. "Oh, you're not getting rid of me *that* easy, Wheeler," she says, grinning despite her exhaustion. "I bought a new dress and everything and I'll be damned if I'm gonna miss out on making fun of your absolutely abhorrent lack of popular music knowledge."

Mike returns her grin, but it's a little dopey and the sight does funny things to El's heart. "You bought a new dress?" They're surrounded by the dance committee students, the room filled with the sounds of their voices as they start to get the meeting underway, but El still hears Mike's words, soft-spoken and almost hopeful and, if they weren't in front of a dozen students, El doesn't know if she'd be able to stop herself from leaning over and kissing him.

So, instead, El reaches up and grabs a lock of her own hair, twirling the strand around her index and middle fingers, while she feels her face warm with a mild blush. “Of course I bought a new dress,” she says, trying to keep her voice steady. “I’m a woman and embrace any and *every* opportunity to buy a new dress.”

Mike huffs out a small laugh, shaking his head a bit. “Sorry, my mistake,” he says just as Melanie, in her role as Student Council Treasurer and chair of the dance committee, calls the last meeting to order.

For the next 45 minutes, El sits next to Mike and listens as the dance committee does one last check to make sure that everything’s set and doles out duties for Saturday, everything from setting up tables to hanging streamers to manning the check-in table.

“...well, I think that’s everything, guys,” Melanie says, clapping her hands together excitedly. “Looks like we’re all set for Saturday. One last thing, though, before I let you guys all go.” Melanie pauses and turns to look over where Mike and El are sitting in the back of the classroom. “I just wanted to take a moment to thank Mr. Wheeler and Ms. Hopper for helping us plan this dance. I don’t think we could have done this without your help and advice. You two have been really good together and I really hope this isn’t the last time you help out the students of St. Ignatius like this.” Melanie looks back at the rest of the Student Council, but El can see the way Melanie’s eyes sparkle with satisfaction and pride – *mischief managed*. “So, everyone, let’s give them a round of applause for the help they’ve given us.”

As the room erupts in applause, a shiver manages to roll down El’s spine at Melanie’s words. *You two have been really good together*, her brain echoes and El risks a glance over at Mike, only to see him looking back at her with a small smile and a faint blush dusting high up on his cheeks. Time seems to freeze when their gazes meet, as it so often does with them, and for a moment, El can almost swear she sees everything she’s feeling reflected back at her in Mike’s eyes, all heart-pounding and soul-soaring affection. But then, the moment ends and they both look away, turning back to the students to thank them for their appreciation.

El’s still in a daze a few moments later as the dance committee

meeting ends and the room fills with the low chatter of the Student Council students. Heart racing in her chest, she turns back to Mike, who's smiling over at her with a small, half smile that looks...a little nervous?

"So, last dance committee meeting, huh?" Mike says and there's a note of sadness that has El's throat tightening a bit.

"Yeah, well, now you won't be forced to spend an hour after work with me every Wednesday," El says, trying to go for teasing, but she almost cringes as it comes out a little self-deprecating, instead.

"Please, forced to be in the same room as a beautiful woman an hour a week? What a hardship," Mike says, grinning. "Besides, it's not like we don't hang out every Saturday."

El gasps a bit because, *oh god, he thinks she's beautiful*. Her heart gives a little flutter in her chest and she bites down on her lip to keep from grinning like the lovesick idiot that she is. "This is true," she says. "Still, it was nice working with you on this. We make a pretty good team, don't you think?"

Mike glances away, clearly fighting his own goofy smile, and looks back at her, shaking his head to toss his hair out of his eyes. El almost fucking swoons. "Yeah, we do. Still have set up and chaperoning on Saturday, so there's time for that to change, but we've done pretty well, I think."

"I don't think it will, though," El says.

"Right," Mike says, letting out thin chuckle. "So, since this is the last dance committee meeting and all, wanna go celebrate getting our free time back? There's this pretty cool sushi bar not far from the café that I think you'd probably like."

For a moment, El can't think beyond the excited panic bouncing around in her brain – *oh god, is he asking me out? No, he can't be, can he?* – but El tamps down on that hope real quick. No, it's just a casual invite, a celebration of a work milestone. And then she remembers about the rehearsal that she's going to be late for and she cringes. "Can I have a raincheck? I need to book it to get to rehearsal and not

be *too* late.”

At this, Mike flushes, embarrassed, and he mirrors her cringe. “Oh, god, I’m sorry. I totally forgot about your rehearsal. Yeah, I mean, totally, raincheck is fine.” He pauses, letting out a small laugh. “Besides, I should probably do some writing tonight. My editor’s been bugging me these past few days for *something* and I don’t have any grading to do tonight, so....”

El grins. “Yeah, get on that, Author Man,” she teases. “I need to read this thing sooner rather than later, so chop chop.”

Mike gives her a flat look as they stand up from their seats. “Anyone ever tell you you’re real bossy?”

El laughs. “All the time,” she says, feeling giddy at the normal give-and-take, flirty rhythm they always seem to settle into. Even though it happens without fail, it also *always* makes her feel like she can float away in a cloud of happiness every damn time.

Later, during dress rehearsal, when El texts Mike during a break, *My feet hurt and I’m tired. Can I go home?*, he texts her back almost immediately: *Well, you could be out with me eating sushi right now. Bet you feel foolish, huh?*

And, even as El’s putting her phone away to get back to rehearsal, she’s once again grinning like a fool.

Because, yes, she could be out with Mike right now.

And, hopefully someday soon, she *will* be.

The day of the Winter Ball is a typical cold, Chicago-in-December morning: partially sunny, light snow flurries in the air, and a biting breeze that cuts through just about everything. It’s the kind of day for curling up in front of a fire and ignoring the outside world.

And it’s also just about the most excited Mike’s ever been for a cold

Saturday in his entire life and it's all because of the Winter Ball.

He shouldn't be, he knows this – the Winter Ball's not his dance, he's a grown adult who got roped in to chaperoning it. But he's going to get to spend the whole night with El while she's wearing a pretty dress, where they'll talk and joke and he won't be able to look away from how beautiful she is and it's going to be *fantastic*.

He's also nervous as *shit* and he can't even begin to put his finger on why.

So, after hemming and hawing over it all day while he putters around his townhouse (he foregoes his usual Saturday at the café; going there the Saturday after Thanksgiving without El made him realize that, like so much else in his life is becoming, the café is *empty* without her), he decides to go to the one person he knows he can count on to help him figure out things related to matters of the heart.

Plus, he's the only person who knows about how Mike feels about El.

So, he calls Will.

Granted, it takes Mike all day until he gathers up the courage to call Will. He spends the day going back and forth between writing, tidying up, and getting his things together for the dance tonight – making sure his suit is ready, polishing and packing his dress shoes, packing a small toiletries bag so he can clean up at the hotel the dance is at after helping set up – before he manages to make the call.

Will picks up on the second ring with a voice that is *way* too chipper. “Mikey!”

Mike shudders as he stands by his bed. “One, don’t call me ‘Mikey’ or I’ll think you’ve been talking to Holly which scares the crap out of me. And, two, why are you so happy?”

“Today’s your school dance thing, right? And you’ll be spending the entire time with your hot teacher woman who you’re *totally* in love with. And I bet you’re calling me because you’re freaking out right about now and you don’t know what to do about it. Tell me I’m wrong and I’ll eat my favorite charcoals.”

“God fucking dammit,” Mike sighs, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “How did you guess?”

“Ha, I *knew* it!” Will all but yells. “I knew it, I knew it. And, please, again, I’ve known you since we were 6 and you’re an open book to me, Michael Wheeler.”

Mike sits down on the edge of his bed, the surface sinking under his weight, and leans forward with his elbows on his knees. “I hate you.”

“No, you love me because I am a ray of sunshine,” Will says, still unfailingly bright. “And I’m going to give you advice about how to take your love live from the possible to the real.”

“Yeah, I *really* hate you,” Mike says with a heavy sigh. “And I suddenly have so many regrets.”

Will lets out a long breath on the other end of the line. “Ok, look, I’m sorry. I’ll be serious. Tell me what’s going on in that head of yours.” Will’s words are comforting, like a reset button on the entire conversation and Mike feels himself relaxing.

So, Mike draws in a deep breath, feeling his ribcage stretch almost to the point of it hurting, and drops his head into the hand not holding the phone. “I’m nervous, Will. I’m *really* nervous.”

“Hey, I’m gonna play Devil’s Advocate for a moment: why are you nervous, Mike? It’s just a school dance. One you’re only chaperoning, by the way. And this woman is your friend, right? It’s not like it’s a date or anything.”

The word “date” makes Mike’s chest feel way too tight. “I want it to be, though,” he says and, completely unbidden, a memory from Wednesday comes to the forefront of his mind, of his strange, roundabout way of asking El out...of the disappointment when she (completely understandably) had to decline. “I asked her out, a few days ago. It was really casual, though, and she said no.”

Will lets out a sympathetic hum. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Mike.”

“No, no,” Mike rushes to say. “She already had plans for the night and, if anything, I think she was disappointed having to say no.”

Mike thinks back to the way El had cringed when she asked for a raincheck, like she had really hated turning him down. “Besides, I framed it as going out to celebrate finishing up helping plan this stupid dance, so, it’s not like I poured my heart out, or anything.”

“Well, still, good for you for putting yourself out there, I guess,” Will says. “But, also, who says this can’t be something like a date if you want it to be? You’ll be dressed up, *she’ll* be dressed up, there’ll be mood lighting, music...I mean, why not? Treat it like you’re actually taking her out to a dance.”

Mike bites his lip, his stomach churning with nerves. “I’ve never been with a girl at a high school dance.” He sighs. “I never *went* to any of my dances in high school. I’ve never asked a woman to dance, I’ve never done *any* of that. I don’t know *how*.”

Will sighs. “Mike, I think you’re overthinking this. You’ve been out on dates before, yes? Going to a high school dance isn’t that different. Just talk to her, be by her side, maybe ask her to dance, but just treat her like you’ve treated other women you’ve been out with. If she likes you as much as you think she does, it’ll be *fine*.”

“Yeah, yeah, ok,” Mike says, taking in a shaky breath. “That sounds doable. Yeah, I can totally manage that.” He sighs, a bit of relief washing through him. “Hey, thanks man.”

Will laughs. “No problem, Mike, any time. Hey, good luck tonight, ok?”

Mike smiles – *god*, he has the best friends anyone could ever ask for. “Thanks, Will. I’ll talk to you later, tell you how it goes, ok?”

“I expect nothing less, Wheeler,” Will teases before he hangs up.

Mike pulls the phone away from his ear and looks down at the screen, noticing the time. It’s just past 3 and Mike needs to get going if he’s going to be at the hotel on time. *El’s probably towards the end of her performance*, he thinks, smiling.

Before he’s even aware of what he’s doing, Mike is navigating to his text messages, pulling up El’s and scrolling up to see the picture she

sent him the night before, of her in a makeup chair, hair pulled back in a stiff bun, her face covered in fine glitter and shimmering make up, wry amusement on her face, head turned at the slightest of angles. *The return of the fairy princess*, the accompanying message had read. *I look like a bath bomb exploded over my head.*

God, she's beautiful, he thinks, gazing fondly down at the picture on his screen. *How is it I even have a shot with someone like her?* Mike has no fucking clue how he got so lucky.

But he *does* know that he needs to leave if he doesn't want to be late. So, after changing his shirt into something a little more flattering – a comfortable, forest green sweater that fits him really well and looks good against his skin – Mike gathers his things and heads over to the hotel.

When he arrives, there're a handful of parents and the dance committee all already at the ballroom. Melanie spots him first, looking over at him from where she's standing in the middle of a few of the large, round tables that need to be set up with tablecloths and center pieces. “Mr. Wheeler, you’re here!” she exclaims, walking over to him. “Do you know where Ms. Hopper is?”

Mike gives Melanie a small smile. “She’s going to be late, probably here around 5 or so? But she’ll be here, promise.” Mike doesn’t say it’s because El is performing just a few blocks away, but Melanie doesn’t look confused, so it’s likely she knows.

“Oh, that’s right! She was telling us she was in *The Nutcracker* today,” Melanie says. “God, I wish I could see her perform. She’s probably, like, amazingly beautiful in her costume and everything, don’t you think?”

That weird frisson of suspicion rolls down Mike’s spine and his smile turns tight. “Probably,” is all he says, even though what he *really* wants to say is “absolutely” because El Hopper is the most amazingly beautiful woman he’s ever met. “So, are we getting started, or what?”

Melanie nods, eagerly excited. “Yes, you can put your stuff down over in the corner, if you need to. I just gave out everyone’s marching

orders, so we're good to turn this place into a winter wonderland!"

Mike has to laugh a bit at Melanie's excitement and, soon, he finds himself helping string up lights and banners around the edges of the room with a couple of the boys on the Student Council and one of the dads who's volunteering to chaperone.

"God, I wonder how the wife pulls me into this every time," the older man says, grumbling as he pushes a thumbtack into the wall.

Mike grins as he looks over at his current partner, taking in the mostly silver hair and the physique of a man who's long-time gym routine hasn't been able to keep up with the ravages of old age – *mid-50s, I'd guess.* "The things you do for love, am I right? Still, I'm sure the kids are glad you're here. They always have such a good time, so thank you for helping out tonight."

"Mr. Wheeler, right?" the man says, squinting at him a bit. "My daughter's in your class, I think. Tina Kessler?"

Mike smiles and looks around the ballroom until he spots the girl in question: medium height, straight black hair, and a wicked mind for chemical compounds. "Yes, she's in my Honors Chemistry class, bright girl. You should be proud of her, Mr. Kessler."

Mr. Kessler lets out a snort. "Please, call me Gary. Whenever I hear 'Mr. Kessler', I immediately start looking around for my dad."

Mike laughs. "Yeah, I know what you mean. When I first started teaching, I kept wondering why everyone was mentioning my dad when they looked at me. Took me a while, but I got used to it eventually. But, you can call me Mike."

Gary grins. "So, you got roped into this, too, huh Mike? Hazard of the job?"

Mike shrugs as he pins up another section of lights. "Let's just say I was volun-told," he says with an exaggerated eye roll.

"Ah, yes, we've all been there and – *whoa.*" The look on Gary's face shifts from amused to gobsmacked and Mike turns to see El walking into the ballroom, garment bag slung over one arm, duffle bag

hanging over the other shoulder, wearing tight leggings and an oversized Columbia sweatshirt, hair pulled back in a loose ponytail and face scrubbed clean. “Who’s that?”

Mike gulps a bit, but he smiles. “That’s El Hopper, the guidance counselor and dance teacher. She’s the other faculty supervisor for the dance.”

Gary’s still looking over at El, still awed. “Man, if I were single and 20 years younger...” he says, trailing off suggestively.

Mike gets it, but the comment rankles. *Dude, you’re married.* But he just shakes his head and tries to move past it. “Hey, I’ll be right back, ok?”

Without waiting for Gary’s response, Mike hops off the short stepstool he’s on and cuts across the ballroom to meet El somewhere in the middle. “Hey, you,” he says, grinning.

El notices him and smiles up at him, her whole face lighting up. “Hey, it’s looking pretty good in here! How are things going?”

Mike shrugs, trying to act casual. “All in all, pretty good! No major hiccups and everyone seems to be doing their part.” He arches an eyebrow, grin widening. “How about you? How was your performance? Were you a good fairy princess?”

El giggles, but the sound is wrapped around a sigh and she’s shaking her head in amused exasperation. “It was the family showing, so there were a million kids in the audience. There was a lot of screaming and crying and talking, but I did my part and I did it well, so that’s all anyone can ask of me. The only hiccup was that Robert almost dropped me, but it was barely noticeable.”

Mike cringes in sympathy. “Well, at least it was mostly fine,” he says, looking down at her things. “Hey, c’mon, I’ll show you where you can put your stuff down while we set up.”

El smiles up at him, batting her eyelashes dramatically. “My hero,” she coos, her voice going high-pitched and breathy like a rescued damsel.

"Oh, ha, ha," Mike grumbles, even as he feels himself swell with pride. "Follow me, little miss comedian."

The next couple of hours seem to just fly by. Mike finishes hanging up string lights with Gary and then essentially spends the rest of the setup with El, floating around from activity to activity, either pitching in for a bit to help out or just checking in to make sure everything's ok.

And, the entire time, Mike and El talk amongst themselves, alternating between light and flirty banter and commiserative complaining. It's the strangest combination of "Anywhere but Here" and "Who Can Flirt the Hardest?" and it's just *amazing*. Mike's never felt so in tune with another person in his entire life – not his family, not the Party, *no one*. It's like he and El are riding the same exact wavelength, where everything – every conversational twist and turn, each new topic and meeting of the eyes – is another step in a dance that Mike feels like he's *always* known.

God, he never wants this to end. Mike knows he could so easily do this for the rest of his life and never, *ever* need anything else. And, from what he can tell, El's having just as good a time, all easy smiles and eyes sparkling with happiness, cheeks flushed, body language open and relaxed and *receptive*. It's more thrilling than anything Mike's ever experienced and he would do almost anything for this to never stop.

It's a little after 6:30, two hours before the dance is set to start, when everything's finished being set up and the ballroom has been properly transformed in a magical winter elegance that would put the Snowball to shame – silver and blue streamers, string lights, sparkling center pieces. *Eat your heart out, Hawkins Middle*, Mike thinks.

The dance committee students are all filing away to get ready, parents in tow, and Mike looks over at the feeling of a hand on his upper arm, touch firm through the fabric of his sweater. The usual thrill runs through him when Mike recognizes the sensation of El touching him and his heart skips a beat in response. "Hey," she says as he looks over at her. "I was gonna grab some dinner from the hotel restaurant before getting ready 'cause I'm *starving*. Wanna join me?"

Mike grins, cheeky and mischievous. “Cashing in that raincheck for a celebratory dinner?”

“As if,” El says with a scoff. “There’s only time for *one* glass of wine tonight and that celebration’s dinner gonna have at least *two*.”

“At least, huh?” Mike teases. “I hope I’m not going to need to carry you out of the restaurant or anything, you lush.”

The look on El’s face is distinctly not amused, but Mike knows it’s playful by the set of her shoulders, the tilt of her head. “Well, you just lost the pleasure of my company for dinner tonight, congratulations,” El sniffs, one eyebrow arched pointedly, before she turns and begins heading to the corner of the ballroom where their stuff is still stashed.

“No, wait,” Mike says with a faux whine, playing along as he trails after her like a lost puppy. “I meant to say, whatever you want, you deserve it. I’ll buy you a whole bottle of wine, even. It’s our celebration dinner, after all.”

El stops by their bags and turns back to look at him, corners of her lips pulled up in a sly, teasing grin. Mike’s never wanted to kiss her more than he does in this very moment. “You’re such an easy mark. So easy to take advantage of.”

“Is it taking advantage if I’m a willing participant?” he fires back, heart pounding in his chest, knowing that he’s grinning like a lovesick fool and not caring in the slightest.

El bites her lower lip and arches her eyebrows once more. “Careful what you’re offering there, Mr. Wheeler, or you’ll find yourself on a slippery slope.” El’s voice, while still teasing, has taken on a breathy, throaty quality that has Mike shivering, every nerve lighting up with pleasure.

Mike licks his lips on reflex, whether out of nerves or excitement (or *both*, he’s not entirely sure). “Oh, I don’t know,” Mike says, feeling like there’s a line he’s about to very deliberately cross. “I think you’ll find I can handle myself in the slipperiest of situations.” Yeah, there’s *no way* El doesn’t hear the double entendre in his words, not with the

way she gasps just barely audibly, her cheeks flushing and lips parting, so pretty and inviting and *oh god*.

“Hmm, we’ll just have to see, won’t we?” El says, the look in her eyes dark and lidded, almost heavy with promise, before she leans over to grab her things. Mike can’t help the way his gaze traces along the curves of her body as she bends over, all lithe grace and effortless sensuality, like she has *no fucking clue* just how sexy she really is.

Mike stands there, almost dumbfounded, star-struck with both how much he’s in love with her *and* how much he wants her, while El passes him his things before taking her own in her arms. “Now, c’mom,” she says, the moment passing, the sensual teasing having mostly faded (though the tension still lingers). “Let’s go grab some food. I’m hungry.”

Mike recovers enough to grin and let out a small laugh. “Yes, ma’am.”

5 minutes later and they’re seated at the bar in the hotel’s restaurant, the barstool on the other side of El holding all of their things while they order drinks and food, the atmosphere dimly lit and intimate. Mike cringes once he fully realizes it, feeling so *very* underdressed.

“Ok, what’s with the face?” El asks as she sips from a water glass while they wait for the bartender to come back with her glass of wine (“Go heavy on the pour,” El had said with a wink) and his beer.

“Just....” Mike trails off, looking down at his jeans and sweater. “Feeling like you and I stick out like a sore thumb. You have to admit we’re a little underdressed for how classy this place is.”

But, to Mike’s amazement, El just shrugs, a small, confident smile on her face. “Hey, we’re paying customers,” she says. “Besides, you’d be surprised how much attitude can carry you along. If you pretend like you belong, people tend not to question it. Or,” she says, grinning. “At least that’s what worked for me in a lot of the places I’ve been.”

The response both distracts and awes Mike (because, *Jesus*, how is she so amazing?) and he finds himself smiling. “Ok, I have to ask, you’ve been to all these amazing places all over the world. What’s

your favorite?”

El scrunches up her nose, clearly torn, and she lets out a small whine. “I mean – I....” She huffs out a frustrated breath. “God, it depends.” She throws him a look, all adorably exasperated. “Sheesh, you might as well ask me to pick my favorite Harry Potter character.”

Mike grins. “Well, alright, then, why don’t you tell me some of your favorite places, just whatever comes to mind.”

So, for the next 45 minutes or so, food coming somewhere in the middle of all that, Mike listens, enraptured, as El tells him about the places she’s been, the things she’s loved seeing, painting pictures so vivid that Mike’s physically craves to see some of these things with his own two eyes. “God,” he sighs after he takes the last bite of his burger. “You’ve had such an amazing life. I’ve never even been out of the country.”

El blushes, but her eyes light up as she pushes her last bit of pasta around her plate, dragging the strands through rich, red sauce. “We should totally fix that, sometime. You’d *love* London, I think. And there are parts of Tokyo that are so much fun to get lost in.” She pauses, perking up even further as her brain races. “Oh, and *Paris*, the Catacombs? *Amazing*.”

Mike’s breath catches in his throat. Is she...talking about traveling? With *him*? The two of them, together?

Calm down there, Romeo, he chides himself. El’s words are borne of excitement and sympathy, not true desire, not a true promise. *She’s just being nice.*

But El doesn’t seem to notice the roller coaster of emotions that barrel through him as she grabs her wine glass and takes the last sip. “Hey, I’m gonna go see about somewhere where we can get ready – I need a shower like you wouldn’t believe. You mind asking for the check? Here’s my credit card,” she says as she fishes out her wallet from her purse and passes over a piece of thin plastic. “I don’t mind splitting it down the middle. Be right back.” El lays her hand on his arm, squeezing his shoulder, and smiles as she slides down from the bar stool. Mike watches as she walks away, drawn by the gentle

alternating sway of her hips and her ponytail, like counteracting metronomes.

“Your girlfriend’s quite the woman.”

Mike starts at the sound of the bartender’s voice and he looks over. He feels his face heat up and he’s suddenly *very* grateful for the dim lighting. “She’s – I mean, we’re....” Mike trails off with a sigh, completely unable to bring himself to deny the statement, even if mostly out of wishful thinking. So, instead, he gives the bartender a small smile. “Thanks. Could, we, uh, get the check?”

“Sure thing, man. Be right back.”

The bartender’s dropped off the check *and* brought back the split receipts for Mike and El to sign by the time El comes back, grinning like the cat that got the canary as she hops up onto the barstool next to Mike. “Here,” she says, sliding over a keycard. “Grabbed us a couple of courtesy rooms.”

Mike raises an eyebrow in confusion as he takes the keycard, inspecting it closely. “Courtesy rooms?”

El sighs. “Oh, you sweet, summer child,” she says with a fond shake of her head. “Hotels, especially nice ones, sometimes reserve a block of rooms for people to use after they’ve checked out to clean up and whatnot. Seriously, we *need* to work on exposing you to more of the world, if it’s the last thing I do.”

Mike grins, unable to help himself as he watches El sign the receipt for her half of dinner. “Hey, I’m still waiting to hear about those private tutoring sessions you promised,” he says, chuckling.

El looks up at him through her lashes, her expression torn between exasperation and amusement. “What am I going to do with you?” she sighs, giggling a bit.

Oh, I can think of a few things, Mike thinks, but bites down on his cheek to keep from saying, even though every inch of him is echoing the sentiment. “Anyway,” he says with a voice that is huskier than he means it to be. “You ready?”

El grins and sets down her pen to start gathering her things. “Yeah, I’ll lead the way.”

The rooms she grabbed them are on the first floor, so it’s a quick walk down muffled, carpeted hallways until she stops in front of one of the doors. “Ok, the key I have is either for this room, or the room just next door,” she says, pointing a little further down the hall with one hand and trying the keycard reader with the other. The light blinks green and the click of the electronic door unlocking sounds almost loud in the hush of the hallway. “Right, looks like you’re next door,” she says. El looks up at Mike with a smile. “Meet out here at 8:15?”

Mike juggles his things, shifting them so he can glance at his watch, which reads 7:30. “Uh, yeah, sure, if that’s enough time for you.”

Again, El gives him a look, but it’s too playful to have any real sting. “Mike, please, I may be a girl, but I’m also a performer. I long ago perfected the art of the quick costume change.” She smiles again and pushes the door open. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to go take a shower since I didn’t have time after the performance earlier today and I feel kinda gross. See you in a bit.”

Mike gulps and goes the next door down, entering the room a moment later, the entire time *all too aware* that, just on the other side of the wall, El’s probably naked or undressing. *God*, it’s almost too distracting and the thought runs through the back of his mind on a never-ending loop as he drops his stuff off on the bed and makes his way into the bathroom for his own shower (because, dammit, it sounds like a good idea, even if to just take a moment to fucking breathe).

But it’s even worse once he’s standing under the spray of the warm water. The showerhead, thankfully, is anchored high on the wall and it doesn’t take much for Mike to get most of his body under the stream of water. His back is only hunched a bit as he leans against the wall, forearms braced against the tile, the sting of the water hitting his shoulders.

Mike closes his eyes and tries to ignore the low thrum of desire that pulses through his veins, but it mixes with all the other feelings that

are coursing through him – nervousness, anticipation, affection, *love* – and it's so heady and dizzying and *intoxicating*.

(she's just on the other side of the wall and mike can just picture her standing beneath the showerhead, water cascading down her body, caressing each and every inch of soft, touchable skin, sluicing off her curves to fall like raindrops by her feet. and he wants so bad to be there with her, to know what her skin feels like slicked with water, to run his fingers through her wet hair, to push her up against the tile and-)

Mike clenches his fist, nails digging painfully into the flesh of his palm, and he takes a deep breath to steady himself. *Ok, Wheeler, you are not going there right now, you hear me?*

But, god, it's hard not to. Everything's all jumbled up. It feels like he's drowning in the best way possible and he never wants to come up for air. But he needs to – he needs to be a fucking mature adult and not a walking hard-on.

So, Mike keeps his eyes closed and he breathes, slow deep breaths in through his nose and out through his mouth, the steam from the hot water seeping into his lungs, calming and rich with oxygen.

And finally, after several long moments, Mike is ready to open his eyes and be the gentleman his mother raised him to be.

Sufficiently calmed, Mike doesn't spend too much longer in the shower, quickly washing and rinsing, and the rest of him moves on autopilot as he goes through the rest of his routine – drying off, getting dressed, attempting to do *something* with his hair, a bit of faffing around on his phone for good measure.

Before he knows it, it's a few minutes before 8:15 and Mike takes a couple of minutes to pack up his things before giving himself one last look in the mirror.

The suit he's wearing is a newer one – something he bought to go to a college friend's wedding about a year ago, and it looks good on him, this much he knows. Black, fitted in the shoulders, slim lapels, flat, fitted slacks that hug close to his hips and fall neatly down the length of his legs. With it, he's wearing a simple white dress shirt, a

thin, black tie, and a pair of black, polished wingtips. His hair's already deciding to be a bit rebellious, curling at the ends, mussing a bit, but there's nothing he can really do to tame it and Mike only spares the energy to give his hair the evil eye before he gathers his things and walks out of the room.

The hallway's empty and Mike has to grin. *Of course I'd be here first*, Mike thinks as he approaches the door to the room El's in. "Hey," he says after knocking. "El, you ready in there?"

"Just a minute!" El's muffled voice sounds. "Just packing everything up."

Mike fights the urge to roll his eyes. "Ok, I'll be out here," he calls back before he leans against the wall opposite the door to wait, hand going for his phone to occupy his time until El emerges.

It takes another minute or so, Mike passing the time by checking his Twitter feed, before the door opens. Mike smiles, prepared to give El shit for being such a girl about getting ready. "Hey, I thought you said—"

But then he looks at her, *really* looks at her.

And Mike forgets what it means to breathe as he stands there, time slowing to a crawl as he drinks her in.

Because, *holy shit*, El is *gorgeous*.

The first thing he notices is *red*, a deep red that goes from shoulder to toe. *Crimson*, his mind whispers, but he's too busy trying to breathe to really notice. The fabric, a rich, shimmering satin, hugs close to every dip and curve, accentuating the shape of her without being crass – sexy yet elegant, teasing yet restrained. The fabric drapes up and over one shoulder, neckline cutting up across her chest, but her other shoulder is completely bare, exposing to his hungry gaze the sweep of her collarbone, the shape of her shoulder, the delicate length of her arm.

Mike's gaze travels down the length of El's body, taking in the way the floor-length skirt shifts around her legs as she twists to clear her

things from the door, exposing the slit in her dress almost hidden by the sweep of her skirt and gifting him with the smallest glimpse of the high heels she's wearing (red like her dress, lifting her up 4-5 inches so that she's only a handful of inches below eye-level).

(later, he'll be unable to keep from staring at the way the skirt exposes the length of her leg from her knee down to the delicate heels she's wearing, will be unable to stop from imagining what it would feel like to let his fingers dip beneath the smooth fabric at the top of the slit and slide his hands up the length of her thigh.)

Mike finally looks back up when she turns to face him and he almost chokes on the gasp that bubbles up inside of him when he looks at her face – elegantly made up, lips painted the same color as her dress, all deep red and so, so kissable; eyes lined with the barest hint of kohl, lashes long and dark; cheeks flushed and almost shimmering.

But it's her hair – *oh god*, her hair – that drags out the barely audible whimper from his throat. Her hair spills down her shoulders and back with abandon, all lush curls and shining strands, teased to look a bit mussed. El has it pinned up on the side where her shoulder's been left bare, a jeweled comb sweeping the hair up and away from her face, and Mike can't look away from the long, uninterrupted stretch of exposed skin from her neck down to her wrist, topped by the glittering diamond stud in her earlobe, the pair of earrings the only jewelry she's wearing besides the comb in her hair.

He meets her eyes after what feels like an eternity, but is really only a few seconds, and there's something in the way she's looking back at him that has him suppressing a shiver – heated, surprised, *pleased*. God, he's sure he's looking back at her in almost the same way.

"Hey," she says after a beat, clearing her throat. "You, uh, you clean up pretty nice."

"Yeah," Mike says, feeling himself almost shrink as he exhales. "You...I mean...." He pauses, sighing, the sound wistful and hopeful all at once. "You look beautiful." The stark, honest words, spoken with a voice that is low and almost raspy, filled with heady cocktail of emotion that is impossible to suppress, are like a shock to the system. He's suddenly very aware that the two of them are

completely alone and standing here like *this*, dressed like it's a romantic night out and it takes *everything* he has to keep from leaning in to kiss her, to coat himself in the taste of her, the feel of her, until their mouths are swollen and glistening, his lips as red as hers.

El blushes under the weight of the compliment and she looks down, demure but smiling. "Thank you," she says. She sighs, breathing out a light laugh. "C'mon, let's drop off our things at the concierge and then head in to supervise the dance."

Right, the dance. God, Mike almost completely forgot about the stupid dance and, really, could anyone blame him? "Yes, sounds good," Mike says after clearing his throat. "Lead the way, partner."

The words, spoken to try and deflect from the magnetic tension between them, bring a levity to the air between them that wasn't there before and El lets out a laugh that makes Mike's soul sing. "This isn't the OK Corral, Mike," she says, grinning at him.

"Oh, I don't know," Mike says, falling into step by her side, easy as breathing. "I'm getting visions of a tense standoff in a saloon. Only, replace the standoff with awkward adolescent dancing and the saloon with the ballroom we just finished decorating."

El levels another look at him as they round the corner. "Mike," she says warningly, a novel's worth of meaning in the simple utterance of his name.

"Ok, ok, sorry," he says. "You win."

"Thank you," El says primly, her tone betrayed by the playful expression that worms its way onto her face.

And, suddenly, Mike's filled with excitement. Because Will was right. This is going to be fine. God, it's going to be *good*, even – probably *great*. He gets to spend the night with the most beautiful woman he's ever met, getting to talk with her and make her laugh and just *be* with her.

And no matter *what* happens, Mike knows he could never, *ever* regret getting this opportunity.

The second the door to her courtesy room closes, El leans back against it and lets out a sound that is somewhere between a groan and a whimper.

Because the night hasn't even really gotten going and, already, El's exhausted from keeping her hands to herself or preventing herself from grabbing Mike and kissing him like she so *desperately* wants to. It's not fair how ridiculously good he looks in that sweater, fitting him like a glove, clinging to the lines of his torso, the color making his eyes seem darker, his skin even more luminescent, and it's so soft to the touch. El's not sure if she wants to peel it from his body and toss it onto her bedroom floor or steal it so she can wear it herself.

Both, both is good, her brain whispers.

And it's also not fair just how he always seems to know exactly what to say to make her laugh or smile or swoon or just *melt*, how the give-and-take between them feels as natural as breathing, as inevitable as the passage of time. El's so keyed up right now, all caught up in the moment and riding the high that's swimming in her veins, and it's crashing up against the nervousness that's been her constant companion for the past few days.

Really, though, if she's being honest with herself, El's been nervous ever since she and Max went dress shopping the previous weekend during the only real block of free time she had between rehearsals. Because she's hoping to dress to impress and take more of a significant step in the relationship between her and Mike as opposed to the tiny baby steps they seem to be taking.

El's not complaining too much, though, about the incremental progress because anything is better than *nothing*. It's also thrilling and exciting and so encouraging. She's still not 110% convinced that Mike returns her feelings, but he seems to feel *something* for her and, well, El can work with that, she really can.

He was certainly flirting with you hard enough earlier, El's more logical

side points out and she flushes at the memory, their conversation throughout the evening laced with double entendres that set El's heart racing in her chest and pounding against her ribcage, making her skin tingle and feel too tight to contain her, like it's two sizes too small.

God, she wants him.

It's not just physical, what El feels for Mike, but it's such a prominent part of the whole package that El can't help but focus on it in this very moment.

Well, you're never going to get to do anything about any of it, physical or otherwise, if you don't start getting ready right now .

And, with that thought, El draws in a deep breath and pushes away from the door to go about making herself irresistibly beautiful, someone who Mike Wheeler could fall in love with and never look back.

El moves at what feels like light speed through getting ready – showering, drying her hair, doing her makeup, slipping into her dress. It's like she blinks and, suddenly, she has only a few minutes before she's supposed to meet Mike out in the hallway.

So, naturally, El poses in front of the mirror and takes a picture, sending it to Max seconds later with a text message that reads: *What do you think, too much?*

Hell fucking no. It's the perfect amount. If that boy doesn't have his tongue rolling out of his mouth, he's gay, I'm sorry. You're fucking gorgeous and he's gonna freak, is what Max texts back when El's in the middle of stuffing her things back into her duffle bag, tossing things in indiscriminately.

God, I hope so, El texts, pausing in her packing.

And then, there's a knock on her door, followed by the muffled sound of Mike's voice through the door. "Hey. El, you ready in there?"

El's heart leaps into her throat and she almost drops her phone. *Shit. "Just a minute. Just packing everything up!"* she yells back while she

hurries to keep packing, not wanting him to wait too long.

A couple of minutes later, she's got her things in her arms and she's leaving the room, an exciting combination of eagerness and nervousness spurring her on.

"Hey, I thought you said—" Mike starts to say, stopping mid-sentence, but El's temporarily focused on getting her things clear of the closing door to pay attention to what's exactly going on.

And then she turns to look at him and she thinks she maybe understands.

Oh. Oh.

Mike's staring at her like he can't believe what he's seeing and wants to devour her all at the same time. His eyes rove up and down her body, warming her from within, making her want like she's never wanted before and stealing the breath from her lungs.

Which is convenient, seeing how El's not sure she remembers how to breathe anyway as she looks at Mike, from his artfully messy hair to the suit that fits so well it looks like it was made for him, hugging close to his shoulders and hips. The black, skinny tie he's wearing pops against the stark white of his dress shirt and El wants to wrap her fingers around it to drag him down for a kiss, wants to run her fingers through his messy, dark hair to see if the locks are as soft as they look, wants to pull him close and fit her body up against his until there's no telling where he ends and she begins.

El's fingers twitch, her hand itching to reach to grab the keycard to the room behind her that she stashed in the front pocket of her duffle bag. God, it would be so easy to reach for it while she reaches for him, to drag him into the room behind her and forget entirely about the stupid dance.

But, no, El has a job to do and it's *not* finding out what Mike Wheeler feels like pressed up against her naked (despite the way they're both looking at each other right now, which, *god yes*, is so affirming, filling her with confidence, making her feel beautiful and desired).

The hours seem to float by after that point. They drop their things off at the concierge desk to be retrieved at the end of the night and head over to the ballroom to watch as students, all decked up for a nice night out, dates walking in arm-in-arm, sign in and begin mingling. There's music and mood lighting and dancing, tables filled with finger foods and punch (with one of the parents watching to make sure it doesn't get spiked), and laughter and high-spirited conversation fills in the rest of the noise.

Ostensibly, El and Mike are chaperoning – and they *are*, really, both of them keeping an eye the best they can on the students, making sure nothing gets out of hand.

It's just that their best isn't very good right now. El, for her part, is too wrapped up trying to manage the rapid beat of her pulse beneath her skin, the tingling that alights every nerve, the floaty feeling that's invaded her body. She's nervous and hopeful and so in love, she doesn't know what to do other than never look away.

Mike and El spend most of the time sitting at a small table set up in the corner of the room, as far away from the speakers as they can get, the table in a place where they can see the entire room. But they're mostly looking at each other as they talk about everything and nothing, happy and flirty and enthralled, unable to stop their gazes from wandering – El to Mike's shoulders, his hair, his hands, while Mike can't seem to stop from looking down at her crossed legs, exposed from the knee down by the slit in her dress, or keep his gaze from dancing across her face and hair.

El's never been to a high school dance before, but she likes to imagine that they're all like this, magical nights spent with someone that you're attracted to, someone that you care for, feeling cherished and special.

But El knows that there's something *else* that happens at a school dance: *dancing*.

Yes, dancing, which El still needs to ask Mike to do. Part of her has been hoping that Mike will ask her and spare her the anxiety of screwing up her courage to do it herself. But the dance is well more than half over and several slow songs have gone by and Mike has

made no indication that he's planning on asking her (*why*, El doesn't want to dwell on).

It's looking increasingly like if El wants to dance with Mike (and she really, *really* does, even if just to know what it's like to be held by him, never mind her mischievous little plan), she's going to have to ask him herself.

So, the entire time El's sitting there with Mike, besotted and enraptured, she's planning and scheming, trying to gather up her courage while she waits for the perfect song.

And then the opening strains of Ed Sheeran's "Kiss Me" come wafting out of the speakers and El can feel it in her bones: *this is her moment*.

One day, in the not-too-distant future, El will look back on this moment and know that *this* is when everything began to change, a moment with a well-defined "before" and "after", the moment that sets into motion *everything* that follows.

But, *in* the moment, El's too busy taking in the room, noticing how many dancing couples are occupying the dance floor, how no one is looking over at the two of them...how perfect this is, the timing never better.

"Hey, so, uh," El says, voice trembling a bit as she looks back at Mike. "I have something I wanted to ask you." Her teeth automatically pull her lower lip into a soft bite, a nervous tic that she's never been able to fully rid herself of.

Mike smiles at her, soft and gentle and supportive and El feels her heart warm at the sight. "Yeah, what is it?"

El lets out a small laugh and she almost cringes at how breathy and unsure it sounds. "So, um, this is really embarrassing, but I never went to any of my high school dances – I was too busy with ballet and I always seemed to have practice or a recital I needed to be out of town for. So, I never got to *dance* at any of my high school dances and I was...." El sighs. "Well, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind dancing with me." The words leave El's mouth with a rush of breath, tossed out there to hang in the air, and El almost swears they're

mocking her in the brief silence that follows. Her heart pounds, leaping up into her throat, and she's almost shaking, she's so nervous. There, she did it. She put herself out there and now the rest is in Mike's hands for him to protect or crush as his heart desires.

Mike's looking at her, face blank and unreadable, *inscrutable*, and he blinks a couple of times, like he's trying to process what she's just asked him. And, just when El's about to rush in to take back the ask or offer a lame excuse or *something* to relieve herself of the unbearable tension that's crawling up her spine, Mike relaxes, smiling, his cheeks flushing a bit as he chuckles. "If you don't mind me stepping on your feet, then, sure, I'd love to dance with you. Fair warning, though, I never went to any of my high school dances, either. So I have no idea what I'm doing."

The transition from nervous to elated is so sudden, El almost has whiplash. As it is, she feels light-headed, like the weight of the world has just been lifted from her shoulders, like she could just float away and never come crashing back down to Earth. Standing, El giggles and holds out her left hand, palm facing down. "Well, then, we can just figure it out together, can't we?"

Mike looks up at her and she shivers at the look that's reflected in his gaze – soft happiness, awe, and something dark and heated that sets her heart aflame. But she doesn't retract her hand, holding it out until Mike reaches out with his right hand, his fingers wrapping around her hand as his palm presses against hers. The warmth of his hand against hers sends a rush of pleasure up El's spine and she lets out a shaky breath as, together, they take a couple of steps away from the table. "Is here ok?" Mike asks, his voice hushed. "It's just...."

"Less visible over here, away from the crowd," El says, finishing for him. "Yeah, this is fine." She smiles up at him and feels her heart race as she realizes just how close she's standing to him. He's inches away and El can feel the heat of him from where she's standing. It's intoxicating and she *needs* to get closer. "So, I think this is how this works," El says, reaching for his other hand and guiding it to her waist. The span of his thumb and forefinger immediately settle against the curve of her waist, his fingers wrapping just above her hip. El can feel the way Mike's hand trembles even as she's fighting

back a gasp, watching the way he swallows roughly.

God, he's just as nervous as she is, El realizes, even as she's hyperaware of the heat of his touch through the thin fabric of her dress, all shiver-inducing and breathtaking warmth, his touch gentle, but firm. El lifts her gaze so she can meet his eyes and she doesn't look away as she takes her right hand away from her hip and slides it up his arm so her palm rests against his shoulder. Meanwhile, she shifts the way their hands are gripped so that their hands are clasped together. Finally, she takes a half step closer, until there's maybe only a few inches separating them, and lets out a shaky sigh. "There," she says, almost breathless, overwhelmed by the gravity of the moment. "I think this is it. Now, we just sway."

El starts them off, Mike following suit, and then they're dancing, bodies moving as one, almost pressed together.

It's everything El could have ever dreamed of.

Mike holds her so gently, like she's going to break if he holds her any tighter. The hand on her hip trembles just slightly and the hand holding hers is a little sweaty, which is ok, because hers is, too – because his arms are strong and warm, his presence as soothing as it is thrilling, and the way he's looking down at her makes her want to kiss him and never, *ever* stop.

El doesn't, though. Because there's *something* about this moment, a strange mixture of the new and the familiar, *déjà vu* flipped on its head, and it takes her breath away, freezing her under its sheer weight.

It's like they were always meant to be here – or *somewhere* like here – dancing like this, holding onto each other, gazing into each other's eyes like nothing else matters. It's as if every path in her life was always going to bring her to him and him to her. Like every version of her is with every version of him.

Like they're *inevitable*.

El can barely breathe as she trembles under the realization and her heart pounds in her chest, so loud she wouldn't be surprised if Mike

can hear it. Because El's not just in love with him – she can't ever imagine loving anybody else. She's in so deep that she's never, *ever* going to find her way out.

And she *never* wants to.

So, she dances with Mike, the two of them gently swaying as she feels them standing on the precipice not just of something new, but of *everything*, unwilling to look away and unable to care as they both drown. The air between them is thick, heady, *rich* with meaning and eager anticipation. Nothing else matters except this very moment, just the two of them, the rest of the world a faraway concern.

(they're both so very unaware, in this moment, of how many eyes are on them, all quiet whispers and eager gazes, the gears of the gossip chain churning to life, and they have no idea what will be in store for them come monday morning...or tuesday morning, as will be the case for el.)

Eventually, as all things do, the song comes to an end. Reluctantly, El stops, stepping back with a sigh. Mike's hands are still on her and she wishes she could stand here forever, being held by him. But she can't and she knows it. So she looks up at him and smiles, all soft and in love. "Thank you for the dance," she says in a voice that's breathless and shaking.

"You, too," Mike says, his own voice low and raspy, causing her to shiver, before he slowly pulls his hands away, touch lingering like he's giving her the chance to stop him, like he's reluctant to pull away. But he lowers his arms down to his sides and El's opportunity to pull him back is gone. Mike grins, but the expression is a little shaky, like he's just as overwhelmed as she is. "Hey, I'm going to go grab some punch, you want some?" The question is a normal one spoken in a world that has shifted 5 degrees off its axis and the juxtaposition is jarring.

Even though El recognizes the effort Mike's making by trying to give them a bit of normalcy, the ground beneath her feet still feels like it's trembling with the revelations that have exploded in her thoughts. Still, she manages to nod and return the smile. "That sounds good, thanks." Mike nods and, with a smile, turns to walk away, El watching him go with a wistful sigh.

Mike comes back a minute later with drinks for both of them and they try to settle back into their old rhythms, but there's an underlying tension that wasn't there before. It's not *bad*, per se – it's a tension full of longing, of bated breaths and building anticipation, like *both* of them are adjusting to this new reality they're finding themselves in and are each equally unsure about *what* to do about it, despite how much each of them might want to.

The rest of the night passes in a blur of quiet, eager yearning, thumping hearts, and buzzing skin. Before El knows it, the dance is over, everything is cleaned up, and all that's left to do is for her and Mike to grab their things from the concierge before heading to their respective cars.

"I think that went pretty well," Mike says as they walk across the first floor of the mostly empty parking garage they parked in to get to the elevator. As it's below freezing, both of them are wearing their winter coats, packed earlier with their things, with their duffle bags slung over shoulders.

El shivers as the chill of the night pierces through the thin fabric of her dress. "Yeah, it did," she says, ignoring the cold the best she can. "The students seemed to have a good time, at least."

Mike smiles over at her and El can't help but trace the shape of his lips with her eyes, her own lips tingling with the desire to kiss him. "Always important," he says. "Hey, what level'd you park on?"

"Level 4, I think?" El says, trying to remember. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure."

Mike nods. "I'll walk with you, just in case."

El rolls her eyes even as she's thrilled and touched by his concern. "Yes, because this parking garage is filled with people wanting to mug unsuspecting women at 11:30 at night."

Mike grins and nudges her with his elbow. "Hey, you never know," he says. "There are all sorts out there. Besides, my mother–"

"Raised you to be a gentleman and would be horrified if you let me

go to my car unaccompanied,” El finishes for him as they reach the elevator and she presses the call button. “I *know*. I think I have that reason memorized by now, you quote it so many times.”

The elevator dings as it arrives on the ground floor and Mike and El step inside. “Oh, good, I’m getting predictable. Was wondering when that was going to happen,” Mike says, amusement flashing in his eyes.

El giggles. “You are *not* predictable.” She pauses, nose crinkling as Mike reaches for the button for the 4th level. “Well, maybe about this *one* thing.”

“Well, at least it’s not a *bad* thing to be predictable about,” Mike says with a sigh.

“Trust me. Being a gentleman is badge of honor. You’re one of the good ones, Mike Wheeler, and don’t you forget it,” El says. She smiles up at him and almost gasps at the way he’s looking back at her, the same longing that she’s feeling reflected back in his eyes, his gaze full of awe and wonderment so deep, she feels like she could drown. Blushing, El looks down at her feet and they finish their elevator ride in silence.

In fact, neither of them speaks even as the elevator opens and they walk out, the sounds of their steps echoing in the cavernous space. El’s car is only a handful of spots away from the elevator – pretty much the only car on that level – and she can feel him hovering nearby as she unlocks her car and tosses her things in the backseat.

It’s only once the rear driver’s side door is closed that El turns to him and breaks the silence. “I had a really good time with you tonight, Mike,” she says, her voice, once again, going hushed and breathless, almost throaty.

Mike’s standing only a handful of inches away from her and El has to look up to look into his face. *God*, he’s tall and she *loves* it, loves thinking about how he could wrap himself around her so completely. “I did, too,” he says, the words low and soft-spoken.

There’s a long moment while they look at each other, the space

between them thick with possibility, heavy with promise. And, before El is fully aware of what she's doing, she reaches up on her toes, one hand stretched out to brace against Mike's chest while the other grabs his arm at the elbow, and she presses her lips against his cheek. His skin is warm and soft beneath her lips and El's senses *fill* with him – the smell of his cologne, the warmth of his cheek pressed against hers, the rasp of his wool coat beneath her palms, the sound of the sharp intake of breath he makes a half a second later, the whisper of his skin against hers as her cheek grazes his when she pulls back.

Slowly, *so slowly*, she lowers herself back down to her feet, her face feeling all too warm, her lips immediately missing the softness of his skin. And when she looks up at him, she fights the gasp that sucks its way through her lungs, her heart pounding as she sees him looking down at her, eyes dark and filled with something so powerful, it almost takes her breath away.

There's a beat while Mike and El stare at each other like they're each waiting for someone to do *something*. But the moment passes – *it's not time, not yet* – and El smiles, feeling weightlessly breathless. "Good night, Mike," she says, biting down on her lip to try and contain her smile by any degree possible.

Mike draws in a deep breath, gaze flickering down to her mouth, making El's heart skip its next couple of beats. "Good night, El," he says, lips curling up in a soft, dreamy smile.

With one last look at Mike, El steps away and into her car to begin her drive home. As she does, she feels the distance stretch between them like a thread growing taut, her whole body filling with the most delicious anticipation.

And she knows, surely as she knows the sky is blue and the sun rises in the east, that *everything* is about to change and change for the better.

God, she can't wait.

Notes for the Chapter:

Quick pulse check: how many of y'all hate me right now? Show of hands? C'mon, raise them high.

I know, *I know*, they didn't kiss. But they were so close! Soon, though, soon. Really, there's only so much more tension this fic can bear.

Guess it's a good thing all this tension is about to break, isn't it?

5. Hanging By A Moment

Notes for the Chapter:

It's only because I love y'all that I got this out this quickly.

(also, because i was alone all weekend and have no life, apparently, but w/e. NOT THE POINT)

God, he can still smell her.

It's been just over 24 hours since Mike discovered what El's lips feel like against his skin – soft, supple, and warm, electrifying and dizzying and *god*, he would do *anything* to feel it again – but it's her scent that's still haunting him long after the feel of her lips pressed against his cheek has faded. Every breath he takes is filled with *her* – the light citrus of her perfume, the soft aroma of roses from her shampoo, the barest hint of the fruit punch they'd been drinking on her breath – intoxicating, *addicting*.

Mike wants to bury himself in her, to surround himself with her presence so completely until all he knows, all he *is*, is *her*. Mike doesn't really care that that's literally impossible; the heart wants what the heart wants and no amount of logic is going to change the way that he feels.

It's been all he can think about. Last night was the most magical night of his entire life and it's upended *everything*. Memories of it have invaded his every waking moment – her lips on his cheek, her scent engulfing him, the warmth of her in his arms, the curve of her hip nestled against his palm, her breathtaking beauty, the way she looked up at him while she danced with eyes full of the headiest swirl of emotions. It's turned his normal Sunday of chores and errands into a distracted mess of a day, leaving him barely able to focus on things like grocery shopping or laundry.

Even now, as he's lying in bed, tucked warmly beneath his bedspread, Mike can't stop replaying every moment from last night as he stares up at the ceiling. God he can't wait until tomorrow so he

can see her again - which, after a quick glance at the bedside clock that stares back at him with the time “11:47” in bright red numbers, is in a little more than 8 hours from now.

God, he just needs to see her. It’s been 24 hours since Mike last saw El and that’s 24 hours *too long*.

To make matters worse, Mike’s barely talked to El today. Sure, he understands *why*. Sundays are pretty busy for El – she usually has rehearsal on top of a longstanding, regular brunch appointment that she pretty much never misses. Though, today Mike knows her regular Sunday routine has been replaced with two performances of *The Nutcracker*, so she’s having to miss her brunch, which he’s sure she’s not happy about.

(Ok, side note: what the hell is up with the obsession with brunch? Like, Will and Greg do the same thing – brunch every Sunday, spending *hours* at a hip restaurant consuming artisanal takes on classic breakfast foods and bottomless morning cocktails. Yeah, Mike likes breakfast foods as much as the next guy and he’ll never say no to a Bloody Mary or a mimosa, but brunch has become such an institution and Mike just Does Not Get It.)

So, yeah, Mike gets why he’s barely heard from El today, why he’s only gotten a handful of text messages from her compared to the normal deluge that makes up the constant back-and-forth of their texting. Doesn’t mean he has to like it, though.

Mike can’t help himself, really – he just loves talking to her. And, after last night, this forced silence is practically *unbearable*. Because last night was so wonderful and all Mike wants is to do it again, to spend hours talking with her, to hold her, to feel the softness of her lips or the heat of her body...to just *be* with her.

That’s all he wants, to be with her every day for the rest of his life.

I need to tell her how I feel, Mike thinks, the thought jolting him from the slow sinking embrace of sleep. *I have to*. The thought, however, sends a wave of anxious fear washing through him and his body trembles in response. He’s never done this before, made the first move. His previous girlfriends (all three of them) had been the braver

halves of those relationships, so Mike never had to be the one to screw up the courage to do something about his feelings. And he's not sure if he knows how to do this. But he *has* to, he really does. The reward is more than worth the risk and Mike will swallow down the fear that bubbles beneath his skin and coats his veins if it means the tension – this sweet, exciting, almost unbearable tension – breaks and he no longer has to hide how he feels about El.

So, tomorrow, he's going to tell her. Mike's going to go up to El and tell her *exactly* how he feels. He's going to take the risk, take the leap of faith, and put himself out there. Because something *so much better* is waiting for him on the other side.

God, Mike can just picture it with startling clarity, fantasies spinning to life inside his very active imagination (there's a reason he's as good a writer as he is).

It'll happen in El's office, during lunch. Mike will come by, dressed with nicely without looking like he's trying too hard (*god, what is he going to wear?*). El will be there, beautiful as always. And when she sees him, he won't give her the chance to say anything before he starts to speak. "El, there's been something I've been meaning to tell you," is how he'll start. "I know we haven't known each other long, but we've gotten really close over these past couple of months. I've never felt this way before about anybody." He'll take a deep breath, pausing for dramatic emphasis. "El, I think I've fallen in love with you."

El will blush prettily, taken aback by his confession, and before she can speak, Mike will eliminate the distance between him and her and kiss her like he's been dreaming about for weeks. It'll be amazing and glorious and everything Mike's been hoping for.

That night, Mike falls asleep with a smile on his face and hope in his heart despite the nerves that buzz along the edges, ready to face what the next day will bring...ready to move his relationship with El to the next step, to seize the happiness that is just within reach.

Mike wakes up eager, ready...*excited*. God, he's so excited, he's woken up a good 20 minutes before his alarm is supposed to go off. And there's no going back to sleep for him today. Not with the way his heart is pounding in his chest, every inch of him wired, almost vibrating with anticipation.

Because this is it. Today is the day where he finally comes clean to El about the feelings he has for her, where he will *finally* stop needing to wonder what it's like to kiss her because he'll *know*, he'll know what it's like to kiss her and hold her and *be* with her.

And he can't wait.

Mondays, Mike normally gets up early to go use the pool on campus. But not today. No, today he needs all the time he can get to make sure that everything's perfect, that *he's* perfect.

So Mike spends way longer than normal getting ready for work – taking extra care while shaving, spending what feels like *forever* trying to figure out what to wear – all the while also feeling like the biggest wastoid on the face of the planet. God, what guy spends this much time preparing to confess his feelings to a woman? It's not like he's *proposing*, or anything.

Deep down, though, if he's being honest with himself, Mike knows that all this worry, all this extra prep, is little more than a cover, a coping mechanism.

Because, as excited as he is to finally be ready to take this step, to be making the first move, he's also *so fucking nervous* and more than a little scared.

Mike's never made the first move in a relationship before. What if he gets it wrong? What if he says or does the wrong thing? Or, worse, what if he's gotten *everything* wrong? What if he's so bad at misreading women that he's completely off the mark with assuming that El feels the same?

So, the entire time Mike spends getting ready, his nervousness and his excitement are at war with themselves, until Mike is a jittery

mess. Hell, he doesn't even need coffee, there's so much adrenaline in his system, and he has no idea how in the fuck he's going to calm down to be a normal, functioning human being today.

Today of all days.

It's a little after 7 by the time Mike's finished getting ready and he takes a moment to give himself a onceover in the bathroom mirror: fitted, neatly pressed black slacks, a crisp, white button down with the top couple of buttons undone (he's still debating whether or not to roll up his sleeves – maybe he'll save that until right before he goes to talk to El; hopefully it'll make him look more attractive than he actually is and, at the very least, it couldn't hurt, right?). And his hair is, well...*his hair*. He's managed to tame it, but he also knows that, in a couple of hours, it'll be its normal mess (still, he has to try).

All in all, he supposes this is as good as it's going to get.

And yet, he's still *incredibly nervous*.

Mike gulps. *Right, gonna need some outside support on this one.*

Mike goes back into his bedroom and grabs his phone from his nightstand – trying not to notice that El hasn't texted him yet and failing *miserably* – so he can send a quick text over to Will: *Hey, sorry to wake you if you're sleeping. You got a minute to talk? I need your help.* Mike hits send and waits. He's never sure about Will's daily schedule – some days Will's up early and, others, he sleeps until mid-morning, with no logical or regular pattern.

But, thankfully, less than a minute later, Mike's phone rings and Will's name flashes across the top of his screen. "Hey, thanks for calling me. I didn't wake you, did I?" Mike asks when he answers.

"No, got up about 20 minutes ago," Will says, voice still a little scratch with sleep. "Everything ok? What's up?"

"Right, so," Mike starts, voice trembling a bit as he sits down on his just-made bed. "You know how I told you about what happened at the dance a couple of nights ago? Well, I'm going to make the first move, Will. I'm going to tell her how I feel."

There's a pregnant pause before Will clears his throat. "Oh, wow. Mike, that's great! Good for you, man. I'm proud of you, putting yourself out there like that."

Mike lets out a weak laugh. "Yeah, here's the thing, though." He pauses, gulping. "I am so fucking nervous, I feel like I'm going to vibrate out of my own damn skin."

The laugh that sounds in Mike's ear is kind and soft. "Oh, Mike," Will sighs. "You'll be fine. She sounds like she *really* likes you, yeah? Just, take a deep breath."

A beat passes in silence before Mike clears his throat. "Wait, did you mean *now*?"

"Yes, now, you silly goose," Will says with a small laugh. "Take a deep breath. In...and out."

Mike breathes in time with Will's words, feeling the bands of tension around his ribcage ease ever so slightly. "Ok, ok," he sighs.

"Good," Will says. "Now, before you talk to her, do the same thing. And don't overthink this. I know you, Mike – you have a tendency to overthink everything. But that'll only make things harder on yourself. Just, when you talk to her, speak from the heart, ok? Be sincere and let the rest go from there."

Mike cringes, trying not to think too heavily on the elaborate fantasies his imagination spun for how this was going to go, and knows that it's too late – he's already overthought this and there's no turning it off now. Still, he nods. "Ok, I'll try, I'll try. Just...I need this to work, Will. I can't take this anymore."

"Hey, regardless of what happens, you'll have your answer, yeah? And, even if she doesn't return your feelings, it's not the end of the world, ok? Just remember that."

"Yeah, I know," Mike says, even though his stomach sours at the thought and he swallows against the thickness that's invaded his throat. Really, though, Mike doesn't know if he could bear putting himself out there only to have his feelings rebuffed. Hell, the only

reason why he's even able to summon the courage to confess *this* time is because he's 99% sure that El has feelings for him. If he dwells on that 1%, it'll make him want to curl up in the corner and cry.

"But, I don't think that's going to happen," Will says, maybe sensing the anxiety that's swirling in Mike's gut. "Everything'll be fine, *you'll* be fine, I know it. You're gonna be great, Mike."

Mike draws in another deep, calming breath and feels the panic begin to recede. "Yeah, yeah, you're right, Will. You're right. I'll be fine, this'll be great. I can do this."

"That's right. You *can* do this," Will says, voice upbeat and chipper. "I believe in you, Mike Wheeler, and I'd wish you good luck, but you're not going to need it." Will pauses a bit and, when he speaks again, his words are quiet, yet firm. "Go get her, Mike. You got this."

Mike lets out a laugh that's tinged with both giddy and nervous energy. "Right, I got this. I do." He smiles, shaking his head in relief. "Thanks, Will. I needed the pep talk."

"Well, that's what I'm here for. Let me know how it goes, ok?"

Mike nods, even though he knows Will can't see it. "Can do, man. And, again, thanks."

"Don't forget to invite me to the wedding, Michael," Will teases. "I'll talk to you later."

"Yeah, later, man." Mike ends the call and looks down at his phone, dwelling over Will's teasing words – *Don't forget to invite me to the wedding* – and Mike resists the urge to scoff.

Yeah, somehow, I think proposing to get married will be easier than this.

The drive to work goes by in a blur – Mike's not entirely sure how he

makes it without crashing – but the first moment of clarity comes when he parks his car...and notices that El's car isn't here.

Mike glances at the dashboard clock – 7:45 – and his brow furrows. *Huh, that's weird.* El usually likes to get to campus by 7:30 to give the students a chance to see her before 1st block or just to get ready for the day.

Maybe she just overslept, or something, Mike thinks. She has been *really* busy recently, with all the rehearsals and ballet performances and helping with the dance *and* with work.

Filled with the sudden urge to text or call her, to see if everything's ok, Mike slips his phone from his pocket, fingers about to unlock it...

But just the thought of doing either, calling *or* texting, sets a flurry of nervous butterflies free in his stomach and Mike gulps against the invading flutters. No, she's probably just running late and should concentrate on getting to work right now. She'll be here soon. He'll *see* her soon.

The thought is reassuring and Mike breathes deeply before he puts his phone away. When he gets out of the car, the cold December morning air instantly assaults him, causing him to suck in a sharp, gasping breath. Mike hurries to grab his things from his trunk before he all but runs inside, huddled against the frigid temperatures, and suddenly he's very much willing to take Chicago's horrible humid summers if it would just stop being so fucking *freezing* all the time.

Mike's still shivering as he walks in through the main school building's front door and, even though Mike knows El's not here, he still takes a quick detour to swing by her office...*just in case.*

The sight of El's closed office door greets him and Mike finds himself slumping a bit. He's not entirely sure what he expected – her car wasn't even in the staff parking lot, for fuck's sake – but still, he'd hoped, hoped he was just mistaken when he didn't see her car, or that she got to work by some other means.

But what really matters, as irrationally panicked as it sounds, is that El's not here to hear Mike confess his feelings *right now* (never mind

the fact that he was planning on doing it *later*) and his nerves, his doubt, are starting to overwhelm his excitement. What if she doesn't show up to work today? What if, by the time lunch rolls around, she's still not here? Or, what if, even if she *is* here during lunch, he's lost his nerve? What if he can't do it?

No, stop, stop, Mike tells himself, pausing for a deep breath. He's overthinking this again, just like Will told him *not* to do, and his nervousness is feeding it.

It's going to be fine – it's going to be *great*, actually. He'll see El soon and he'll confess his feelings and all this anxiety will just disappear because he'll be kissing her and it'll be *amazing*.

The thought is a calming, grounding one, oddly enough, and hope swells inside of him once more, pushing aside the sinking, anxious feeling that's pulling down at his stomach.

Regardless, he's a little concerned that El isn't here yet and, despite his earlier caution, Mike pulls out his phone and sends El a quick text: *Hey, noticed your office door is closed. Hope everything is ok.* He slips his phone back into his pocket without waiting to see if she's texting back and heads down the hall towards his classroom, mind already transitioning to the material he needs to teach for his regular Chem class, his first of the day.

He doesn't notice that El doesn't text him back.

Well...not for a while, at any rate.

The first couple hours of the school day pass in a weird haze of amorphous energy, one that Mike partially understands. It's the last week before winter break and the students are filled with the strange combination of excitement for the three weeks off *plus* the agony of having to wait for break to start. It's a feeling Mike remembers very well from when he was in school and he 100% sympathizes.

The rest of the weird mood, though...that's not so clear.

It feels like everyone's *staring* at him and it's making him nervous... which, given that he's *already* nervous is so not helping right now.

It's strange, though. His students are *supposed* to stare at him – he's their teacher, they should be paying attention. But there's something in the way they're looking at him – eager, amused, curious – that sets him on edge. He both doesn't want to know and *really* wants to know, all at the same time (but “wanting to know” is winning out since Mike has never done well with the unknown, so hopefully something will shed some light on what the fuck is going on).

In the end, he doesn't actually have to wait that long to find out what's going on.

Because after he teaches Chemistry 1st block, he teaches Honors Physics 2nd block. And if the primarily junior-attended Chemistry class was giving him weirdly eager looks, the senior filled Honors Physics class is downright *giddy*, full of giggles and knowing stares and – *just what in the fuck is going on?*

Whatever it is, the usual suspects are the nexus of it: Melanie, Paula, and Caroline. And, with the way they're looking at him, all tittering giggles and sly, eager looks, Mike knows he's going to get cornered after class, just *knows* in the same way prey knows it's being hunted.

And, sure enough, once the bell rings signaling the transition from 2nd block to morning break, it's like Mike blinks and suddenly, the three senior girls who are becoming the bane of his existence are standing *right* in front of him, like they're the goddamn Weeping Angels or something.

Mike sighs. *Well, there goes checking to see if El's here.* Maybe if he gets Melanie and others out of here fast enough, he can run down the hall check on El before the 15 minute morning break is over. “Alright, what's going on with you three?” Mike asks, cutting to the chase. “You guys have been giving me weird looks and laughing at me all morning. So what gives?”

The trio of girls looks at each other, all conspiratorial and mischievous giddiness, before turning back to him. “We saw you and Ms. Hopper dancing at the Winter Ball on Saturday,” Melanie says, the words pouring out of her at a speed only teenage girls can achieve and Mike feels like he's been punched in the solar plexus. Ok, *this was not what he was expecting....*

“Yeah, we *all* saw you,” Paula says.

Caroline lets out a dreamy sigh. “You two were *so* cute, it was *so* romantic.”

Melanie leans forward, pushing against the far edge of Mike’s lab demonstration table. “Are you gonna ask her out? Because that would be *awesome*. We think you would be *so good* together.”

“Yeah, Mr. Wheeler, are you and Ms. Hopper going to start dating?”

“Do you think you might get married someday?”

“Caroline, that’s a little presumptuous.”

“But, *Paula*, it’s a valid question.”

“Girls, you both have good points,” Melanie says. “But—”

Mike holds up a hand. Right, he’s had about enough of this. “Ok, *stop*,” he says, maybe a little more harshly than he meant to, but the effect is the same: all three girls quiet and look over at him, wide-eyed. “Whatever’s going on between me and Ms. Hopper, no matter what it is, is *our* business and no one else’s, ok? And, look, don’t think I haven’t noticed the three of you acting strangely when it comes to me and Ms. Hopper. I don’t know what’s going on there, but I need you to stop it, ok? Focus on your studies and your friends and your families. But this meddling of yours ends now, do you understand me?”

There’s a long, almost painful silence before the three girls look at each other, the looks on their faces chastened and almost sad, and nod. “We’re sorry, Mr. Wheeler,” Melanie says in her role as the ringleader, her tone contrite if a little pouty. “We...we just wanted you to be happy, is all.” Paula and Caroline make noises to the same effect, like a sad teenage Greek chorus.

Mike finds himself sighing with weary resignation – there’s just *too much* going on right now and this is probably the one thing he didn’t need. “Look, I’m touched by the sentiment, I really am,” Mike says, more tired than he expected to sound. He remembers right in this moment that he hasn’t had any caffeine and Mike can feel the

beginnings of a caffeine withdrawal headache right behind his eyes. “But my private life is just that: *private*. Same with Ms. Hopper, or any of the other teachers. Now, do I have your word? Enough meddling?”

“We’ll stop, we promise. Right, girls?” Melanie says, looking back and forth between her two friends, who both nod in turn.

Mike lets out another sigh, this one of relief. “Ok, good. Thank you.” Mike glances up at the clock and sees that 5 minutes of the break have passed and a little thrill runs through him. *There’s still time.* “Alright, run along, you three. Go enjoy your break, alright?”

“Thanks, Mr. Wheeler,” Paula says as she heads towards the door, Caroline and Melanie trailing behind her.

Only, Melanie pauses when she gets to the door and she turns around, her thumbs hooked in her backpack straps. “You and Ms. Hopper would be *really* good together, though, Mr. Wheeler,” she says, voice hushed. “I think she really likes you. And I think you really like her, too. And, well...I hope everything works out.” With a small smile, Melanie turns, disappearing out the door a second later, leaving a very flabbergasted Mike standing alone in his classroom.

Mike stares at the empty doorway for a long, frozen moment before he lets out a short chuckle. “Huh, well alright, then.” He finds himself smiling, strangely buoyed by Melanie’s words, and he glances up at the clock to see that he has just under 10 minutes left until his second regular Chem class. *Plenty of time to see El.*

Mike walks out of his classroom, making sure to grab his coffee mug before he leaves so he can fill it in the teacher’s lounge, and heads for El’s office, excited, elated, *eager....*

Until he sees the closed office door with the note taped to the front that reads “Ms. Hopper is out sick today.”

That’s it, no further explanation, no word on when she’s coming back in. Just that she’s out sick.

And Mike goes from riding high to crashing and burning at the speed

of the written word.

With a trembling hand, Mike fishes his phone out of his pocket to look at the text message he sent El earlier that morning, to see if she's texted him back. If she was out sick, she would have let him know, she would have *told* him.

She hasn't.

And there's no indication, either, that she's even *read* his text, never mind responding to it.

The only reasons for that are either she's really sick and doesn't have the energy to even check her phone...or she doesn't want to talk to him – that something, *god knows what*, has changed how she feels about him in the last 36 hours.

No, no, don't do this, Mike warns himself, cursing himself for being melodramatic, for once again overthinking this, for letting his imagination run away with him.

It's not true, he *knows* it's not. He's 99% positive that it's not.

And yet....

The doubt, given strength, fueled by his own stupid imagination,curls up under his heart, pierces it with sly tendrils, and *squeezes*.

Mike gulps and stares at El's closed office door. What once seemed so sure not 2 hours ago is suddenly looking a lot shakier, a lot less certain. And this doubt, dark and insidious, pairs up all too nicely with the deflated hope, the wind taken out of his sails at finding El not where he thought she'd be, of finding out that his elaborate fantasies are just that: *fantasies*, left to crumble uselessly at his feet.

Still holding his phone, still hunting for hope or for deliverance, Mike sends El a quick text message: *Hey, just saw the sign on your door saying you're out sick. Let me know if everything's ok, yeah? How're you feeling?* Mike stares at the sent message for longer than is useful – *maybe she'll text him back right now* – before locking his phone and slipping it back in his pocket.

With one last look at the door, Mike turns and slinks away (or, at least, that's what it *feels* like). The headache from the caffeine withdrawal is making itself known with a demanding thud inside of his skull and Mike *knows* it's not helping his mood, so he shuffles his way into the teacher's lounge to pour himself some coffee.

Several pairs of eyes look over at him as he walks into the room, but, thankfully, no one talks to him. *Good, very much not in the mood right now*, Mike thinks. Because his phone hasn't buzzed with any incoming text messages. And, irrationally, the longer his phone remains still, the more Mike's spirits sink.

Throughout the day, Mike's thoughts are never far from his phone and he checks it constantly between classes, sending her a handful more messages as the hours tick down: *Hey, must be pretty bad. Hope you get better soon! – Hey, I'm starting to get a little worried. Do you need anything? – Me again, just checking. – Hey, you there? – Sorry, I must be bugging you. I'll stop, let you rest.*

None of them he gets a response to. None of them are even *read*.

So, again, either it's *really* bad or she's ignoring him.

Mike's not sure which one's worse.

When he finally hears back from El, it's until much later in the afternoon. He's been home for about 15 minutes when his phone *finally* buzzes with an incoming text message and Mike would be ashamed at how fast he fumbles to unlock his phone if he weren't so damn *eager*.

It's El, *finally* texting him back. But the words he reads twist in his gut. *Hey, I'm ok. Woke up feeling like crap, just rundown. Spent the day sleeping. Feeling better now, though. See you tomorrow. Thanks for checking in on me. I appreciate it.*

That's it. No excitement, no emotion...just flat, perfunctory, *generic*. Like they're acquaintances or casual friends.

Like they haven't spent *weeks* talking about everything and nothing, like they didn't just share the most amazing night of Mike's entire

life...like they haven't been falling in love with each other.

There's an explanation, Mike's sure of it. There just *has* to be...right? He couldn't have been misreading *all* of those signals – all the flirting and the touching and the coy smiles and the soft laughter and – *fuck*. No, he wasn't imagining it and he *wasn't* misreading it. Something is going on, though, but he has no clue what it could be. And it's throwing him off like *nothing* else ever has.

Mike all but throws himself back into the couch, head thumping painfully against the top of it, and he frowns at the ceiling.

When he woke up that morning, he'd been so *excited*. Now it's like he's unsure about *everything* – his judgement, what to do, how to think....

And he has *no* idea what he's going to do about it.

It takes El 5 minutes after getting home from the dance to regret not kissing Mike on the lips instead of on the cheek. She'd been right there, so close, close enough to smell him, to *feel* him. All it would have taken was to move an *inch* over to the right and then her lips would have been on his. God *why* didn't she?

El knows why, though.

It's because she's chicken shit.

She wasn't *brave* enough.

A kiss on the cheek is safe, friendly...permissible. A kiss on the lips, though? That's not so easy to explain away, to excuse.

A kiss on the lips means exposing the true depths of her feelings, revealing *everything*, and putting herself out there in a way that just opens her up to rejection.

No, El's not brave enough.

But, *god*, Mike makes her want to be. And she thinks that soon, *real* soon, she's going to be brave enough. Because this is becoming *unbearable*, because the tension between her and Mike makes her want to scream, it's so heavy, so *thick* it's almost palpable. And she needs it to break so bad, she can taste it.

Just like she wants to taste *him*.

It's this thought that floats happily through El's mind as she undresses and scrubs herself clean from the evening, slowly peeling away the magic from her skin, her hair, her body. But some of it remains – in the beating of her heart, the softness of her sigh, the tingling of her lips, the memory of the heat of Mike's hand on her hip – and she crawls into bed minutes later, the exhaustion of the past few weeks sinking her down onto the mattress.

She's asleep within moments, a smile on her face and a song in her heart.

But then Sunday comes and it's non-fucking-stop. El has to forgo her usual Sunday brunch (and she hates, *hates*, cancelling on them like this, but there's nothing for it and she knows they'll be fine without her) so she can head to the performance hall to be there by 9 for all day, all things Nutcracker.

She barely has the chance to talk to Mike, managing to send him a few text messages here and there, light and inconsequential, not at all reflective of what they shared the night before while her day goes by in a blur. There's warmups and spot run-throughs and costuming and *two* performances – one at noon and one at 4 – and by the time El's done for the day, she has just enough energy to make a quick stop at the grocery store for some premade meals before she crawls home and straight into bed.

She's asleep by 8:30, still dressed in her post-performance leggings and tank-top, the lingering remnants of glitter still stuck to her cheeks and lips.

When El wakes up, it's just after 5 in the morning and she feels like she's been run over by a semi-truck. Every inch of her just *aches*, a bone-weary exhaustion that makes even rolling over to grab her

phone an excruciating experience. She gulps and her throat feels tight and swollen, just on the edge of scratchy. And the back of her head feels like someone's stuffed it full of cotton.

Yeah, she's not sick, but she's *damn* close.

Overrun, her brain whispers in a semi-lucid moment and El can't deny it. She's been burning the candle at both ends for weeks now and this is her body's way of telling her to *stop*. El knows if she doesn't listen, she's only a few days from being bedridden for two weeks straight and she really can't afford that right now, not with the holidays coming up and all the things going on back home

Remember, you promised to help out with that Christmas Pageant. You need to be well-rested for that. Right, yes, the annual Christmas Pageant, put on by her high school dance club teacher, which is essentially just a Christmas recital with some ballet, some other types of dance, and little Christmas skits. In the past, El would go home two weeks before Christmas as often as she could and, this year, when she was asked, El couldn't say no. School will be out, the Nutcracker will be over – she has the time. So, on this upcoming Sunday, after her last matinee performance of the Nutcracker, she's driving back to Indiana so she can help Ms. Trainor plan and practice and make last minute costumes so that, by the 23rd, the pageant is ready to go.

But she won't be able to do any that if she's sick and bedridden – never mind the rest of the Nutcracker performances *and* this last week of school before break starts.

So, with all that in mind, El unlocks her phone, squinting at the harsh light of the backlit screen, and navigates her way to her email so she can sent a quick note to the Vice-Principal that she's going to be out for the day.

And, with that done, El all but throws her phone back down onto her nightstand, curls up under the covers, and falls asleep almost immediately.

She wakes up a couple of times – once to go to the bathroom, another to grab a quick glass of water – but otherwise, El sleeps the *entire*

day.

When El finally wakes up just before 3 in the afternoon, she's still tired but she feels almost like an entirely new person. El rolls onto her back and stretches beneath the covers, letting out a satisfied groan that she feels all the way down to her toes. Her bed is soft and, for a moment, El wants to let the gravitational pull of the warm cocoon she's in lull her back to sleep. But, if she does, she'll never fall asleep later and then her sleep schedule will be all messed up. She knows that, even with sleeping all day, she'll be tired enough to fall asleep at a mostly normal time and she doesn't want to risk playing with fire on this one.

So, despite how tempting it is to stay, El pushes the covers off and slides out of bed, feeling a multitude of tiny, twinging aches in every joint as she heads for the bathroom to take a shower. *Should probably stretch after*, she thinks, to ease out the rest of the kinks and tight soreness.

The shower, plus the stretching, *plus* a good, solid meal bring El the rest of the way into feeling like a normal human being again and after doing the handful of dishes left in her sink, she crawls back upstairs to snuggle in bed, thinking the entire time about what she wants to watch on Netflix, mentally running through her queue.

It's habit that has her grabbing her phone as she slips back under the covers and her heart leaps into her throat as she sees Mike's name flash across her screen, multiple text message notices plastered on every inch of the glass.

Smiling, El unlocks her phone and goes to read Mike's text messages. But, with each one she reads, the smile slips from her face, her heart adopting a strange, hollow thump as it sinks down to her stomach.

It starts with *Hey, noticed your office door is closed. Hope everything is ok* and each message gets both more anxious and more distant before ending with *Sorry, I must be bugging you. I'll stop, let you rest*. There's nothing immediately off-putting about the text messages – they're all polite and concerned and worried, just like El expects from Mike – but the swirling despair in El's gut says otherwise. She likes to think she knows Mike well enough by now to read between the lines and

all these text messages tell her is that he's pulling away, distancing himself from her.

And El can't even begin to understand *why*.

Is he having regrets after Saturday? Or did something else happen? Is he angry at her? Did she do something to make him feel bad? To offend him?

Saturday night was so amazing and when it was over, she felt like she and Mike were on the same page, like they were in the final stages of a dance with a known and very much welcome ending. But now....

God, she feels so blindsided, so confused, like everything she thought she knew, thought she *had*, is slipping away through her fingers.

This is what you get for not being braver, her heart screams at her. *This is what you get for falling in love.*

The thought sours in El's stomach, making her almost feel like she wants to throw up. She swallows roughly, closing her eyes tight as she tries to make sense of what's happened.

Take a step back, survey the problem, then come up with a plan of action. The words are her father's, a life lesson she learned at a young age and has *never* forgotten. They ground her, orienting her towards finding a way to fix this instead of freaking out about the problem. And, make no mistake, *she's going to fix this*. Whatever happened, she's going to figure out a way to make this right, to get back to where things were less than 48 hours ago.

And it starts by replying to Mike. He's been texting her all day, clearly waiting for a response that has yet to come.

With trembling fingers, El starts typing a response. She gets about three words in – *I'm so sorry* – before she freezes, unsure about *what* to say. How to get across everything she's feeling and thinking into a text? How to not make this worse? How to convey her confusion, her hope, her desire to make things right through the most impersonal communication medium known to man? *Especially* when El has never been the best with words in the first place?

A frisson of fear ripples down El's spine at the thought of making an ambiguous situation into a horrible one. No, better play it safe, give him an explanation for her lack of response *now* and fix this when she sees him in person tomorrow.

In the end, after several more false starts, this is what she settles on: *Hey, I'm ok. Woke up feeling like crap, just rundown. Spent the day sleeping. Feeling better now, though. See you tomorrow. Thanks for checking in on me. I appreciate it.*

There, El thinks with a nod as she hits send. It's got an explanation, and her gratitude, and a promise to see him tomorrow – all the things she needs to make sure to say.

Satisfied, El puts her phone down on the nightstand and turns her mind towards finding something to watch – anything to keep from anxiously watching her phone to see when she gets a reply.

A reply that, it turns out, never comes.

Afternoon turns into evening, the hours passing, *bleeding* into each other, and the silence from the other end of the text message exchange is deafening, ringing loudly in El's head and *impossible* to ignore. Several times, El finds herself reaching out for her phone before she's even fully aware that she's doing it and she has to forcibly put the phone down to stop herself from sending another text message. What would she even say? It's clear that Mike's read her text message from the time stamp beneath it – he just doesn't want to reply and nothing El can do will make him. Besides, what if she just makes it *worse*, whatever's going on with him, by texting him again?

No, she'll see Mike tomorrow where she can *talk* to him face to face, where she'll watch his facial expressions, hear the tone in his voice, read his body language – where she'll be on firmer ground and not have to rely on the written word to communicate. She's always preferred talking with someone where she can see their face, anyway; there's not as much room for misinterpretation (which is what she's praying to everything that is holy is what's going on here).

Yes, she'll talk to Mike tomorrow and clear up this misunderstanding and it'll be fine. It'll all turn out just fine.

And yet, her stomach still swirls with unease, sour and paralyzing, spreading tingling numbness from her fingers to her toes and she fights to keep the fear at bay – fear that she's screwed everything up somehow.

Just like every other relationship you've had, the insidious voice in the back of her head whispers. It's the voice of her self-doubt, of her insecurities. El's usually really good at ignoring that voice, at suppressing it, and she *hates* that it's resurfacing because of Mike. Especially because she *knows* Mike would never do anything to hurt her. If she's sure of *anything*, it's that Mike Wheeler is the best kind of people – kind, caring, empathetic.

(But, then again, she was *so sure* about Mike's feelings for her not 24 hours ago and now she's finding herself doubting *that*, so, what does she even know, anyway?)

El carries these thoughts with her the rest of the evening and, when she eventually falls asleep that night just before midnight, she's curled up tightly beneath the covers, arms wrapped around her pillow, like the warm cocoon she's buried herself in will keep those thoughts at bay.

Like it'll make everything better.

It doesn't though.

Well, not quite.

El wakes up on Tuesday morning, feeling a little more level-headed, a little less melodramatic. Yes, something is still wrong, off-kilter. But El can manage this, she *really* can.

Look at the evidence, she thinks as she gets ready for work. She and Mike were in a great place on Saturday and even all the way through to Sunday night (though she hadn't had many opportunities to talk to him that day).

It's clear that whatever happened to cause this new distance, this new shaky ground happened *yesterday*. So it either has something to do with El being out of work sick...or something else at school.

(Yes, she's ignoring the dark whispers of doubt in the back of her head – *you've misread his signals, he doesn't care about you the same way* – ignoring that voice is the only way she's going to be able to walk through St. Ignatius' front door.)

Time for the moment of truth, El thinks as she makes the short drive to work, her hands trembling where she's gripping the steering wheel.

God, she's so *nervous*. It's a combination of a lot of different emotions – anxiety, desire, hope, fear – but the thing all her emotions have in common is *Mike*. Mike's at the center of everything and she *so badly* wants to tell him that.

But, first, she needs to fix whatever broke, to make things right, to get back to where they were just a short time ago.

El parks her car in the staff parking lot shortly before 7:30 and a quick glance at the handful of other cars shows her that Mike's not there yet. It's a Tuesday, not a day he uses the school's swimming pool to swim laps, so he won't be in for another 10 to 15 minutes.

So far, so normal.

El gathers her things and braces herself for the frigid walk from her car to her office, clenching her teeth to keep them from chattering. She practically runs the last 100 feet, glad she's taken to wearing tennis shoes outside so she doesn't risk slipping and falling (she has a pair of heels in her purse that she'll change into, her second favorite pair – black, patent kitten heels that are both comfortable *and* stylish).

It's not much longer later when El finally settles herself behind her desk – coat hanging on the rack in the corner, tennis shoes swapped for her heels, fresh coffee steaming out of her mug – and she lets herself get distracted by booting up her computer and checking her email while she waits for Mike to stop by.

It's become part of their new routine over the past couple of weeks, since after Thanksgiving: Mike will swing by every morning to poke his head just to say good morning and to chat for a few minutes before he goes to prepare for class, giving them a handful of hours apart before they meet up again for lunch. It's a routine that only took a few days for El to be able to set her watch by.

Which makes the sound of the morning bell all that more shocking.

Because it's the start of the first block of the day and El hasn't seen Mike *at all* yet.

Frowning, heart pattering with anxious concern, El gets up from her desk and slowly makes her way down the hallway towards Mike's classroom, making especially sure not to let her heels clack too loudly against the tile floor.

Maybe it's his turn to be out sick, El thinks, casting about for something, *anything*, to quell the uneasy feeling bubbling up in her stomach.

So, naturally, the very next second, El sees that Mike's classroom door is open as it comes into view...*and* she can hear his voice as he starts his first lecture of the day.

For a moment, El freezes in the hallway, one hand fistling over her heart, the other by her side, eyes slipping shut. He's here and he didn't stop by to see her – god, he's *ignoring* her.

No. El draws in a deep breath and chides herself from jumping to conclusions. Maybe he was just running late and didn't have time to stop by. *Not everything's about you*.

Oddly enough, the thought calms her, bringing a sense of reassurance that she so desperately needs. And, feeling sufficiently in control of herself, El takes a couple of steps forward so she can peer into Mike's classroom, so she can get her first glimpse of him in more than two days.

The squeeze that El's heart gives when she spots him is almost *painful*, it's so powerful. He's a little paler than normal, the skin

around his eyes a little too dark and tight, shoulders a little too tense. But he's still so beautiful, so handsome, it nearly takes her breath away, and El finds herself sighing at the mere sight of him.

She stands there for another moment or so – enough to reassure her that he's really here, but not long enough to feel like a creepy stalker – before she turns and heads back to her office.

She'll talk to him during the morning break, El decides. And, for the next couple of hours, she does her best to put Mike out of her mind – going about her work, answering emails, talking to a couple of students as they drop by her office – but the anxiety lingers the entire time, making her shoulders and neck feel tight, her skin too stiff.

When the bell rings at the end of the second block, El isn't ashamed at the way she all but jumps out of her chair, downing the last sip of coffee in her mug just so she has an excuse to be wandering the halls – if anyone asks her what she's doing, she can honestly say getting a refill for her coffee.

But El's first stop is to Mike's classroom. There are students milling about as she moves through the hallways and El can feel their eyes on her – searching and curious, *amused*, like they're in on a secret and El's the only one who isn't. She does her best to ignore it though and is standing in the doorway to Mike's classroom moments later.

Only, once she gets there, *he* isn't. El pauses for a moment, frowning, thrown a bit off balance. *Well, ok, then....*

Shoulders slumping a bit, El turns and makes her way to the teacher's lounge. At the very least, she can get a refill of her coffee out of this little trip.

The teacher's lounge is only partly filled when she walks in and El can't help but smile when she sees Liz Hiroto standing by the coffee maker. "Hey, you," El says as she comes up to the other woman.

Liz turns and the smile that pulls up on her lips makes El feel like she's just walked into a trap. "Hey, there. How're you feeling?"

El's eyebrows arch and she can feel the way her smile turns hesitant.

“Better?” Yeah, ok, that shouldn’t have sounded like a question. But the way Liz is looking at her raises all the hackles on the back of her neck. “Just feeling pretty overrun, you know? Between performing and work and the Winter Ball, I just overextended myself. Slept literally until 3 in the afternoon, yesterday.”

If anything, Liz’s smile turns even more giddy and mischievous. “Oh, that’s right, the Winter Ball was on Saturday.” She moves aside as El steps up to the coffee maker to pour herself some. “You know, word around town is that you and a certain tall, dark-haired science teacher shared a *pretty* romantic dance towards the end of the night.”

El pauses mid-pour and looks over at Liz, wide-eyed, a million pieces clicking into place all at once. *Oh my god, is everyone talking about this? Is that why everyone was looking at me funny? Shit, is this what’s going on with Mike? Is he embarrassed about dancing with me? That has to be it. God, it makes so much sense now.*

Without a word, El finishes pouring her coffee and slides the carafe back under the percolator. She turns to Liz, who’s still staring back at her expectantly, and lets out a harsh sigh. “Liz, please don’t tell me *everyone* is talking about it.”

Liz practically *cackles*. “Oh, everyone’s talking about it. Didn’t help that, since you were gone yesterday, Mike was a complete *bear*, just glaring at everyone and-” Liz stops mid-sentence, looking past El’s shoulder, her grin growing even wider. “Speak of the devil.”

El sucks in a sharp gasp and whirls around to see Mike walking into the teacher’s lounge.

And a hush falls over the entire room. Oh, sure, people are still talking. But El can feel their surreptitious gazes, all eyes on her and Mike, curious and eager.

But then Mike spots her – she knows the moment he does by the way his eyes widen and cheeks flush just a bit – and the rest of the room ceases to matter.

El’s heart flutters in her chest and she can’t tear her gaze away, not even when she feels Liz lean in to whisper in her ear, “Good luck. Try

not to make out in the teacher's lounge, ok?" before walking away and leaving El alone by the coffee maker.

It's like everyone gives them a wide berth as Mike makes his way to where El is standing, his own empty coffee mug in his hand. Only, when Mike gets to the coffee maker, he doesn't reach for the carafe. Instead, he stops and stares down at El, a million thoughts and emotions written across his face. El wants to catalog each and every one of them.

But, she just smiles, hopes she's coming across as reassuring and open. "Hey, how are you doing?" she asks, going for light, easy... approachable.

The smile that Mike gives her in return is tight and hesitant, but still what El can only describe as hopeful. "I'm ok. How are you feeling? Not still sick?"

El lets out a light laugh, almost a giggle, and looks down for a split second as she feels her face heat up. "Wasn't all the way sick," she says, looking back up. "I've been burning the candles at both ends for weeks now and when I woke up at, like, 5 in the morning and felt like shit, I knew if I pushed it anymore I was gonna catch pneumonia or something. So, I emailed the Vice-Principal and went right back to sleep. I think I woke up a couple of times to get water and stuff, but I pretty much slept right until late afternoon."

Mike relaxes a bit as he listens, pouring and fixing his coffee all the while. But there's still a tension present in his shoulders that pains El to see and it's reflected in the way his face looks a little pinched and wary. Plus, El can't help but notice, everyone's watching them while trying not to be obvious about it and it's making the whole room feel overbearing. "Well, that's good. I'm glad you're feeling better," Mike says as El's heart sinks a bit at the polite distance in Mike's voice. *God, he must be so embarrassed right now. Everyone's gossiping about us.*

She needs to talk to him, El realizes with a jolt. And it needs to not be in this room. Sighing, El grips her coffee mug with one hand while her other reaches out to touch Mike gently at the elbow. "Hey, you mind walking me back to my office? I wanna talk to you about something."

El pretends not to notice the way Mike jumps when her hand touches him and she's not sure if it's because he likes it...or because it makes him nervous. "Yeah, uh, sure," Mike says after clearing his throat, gesturing for her to take the lead.

El starts walking and she can't help the happy skip her heart gives when he walks in tandem with her, by her side, matching her pace, only racing ahead a bit to hold open the door to the teacher's lounge for her. The hallways are a lot emptier than they were when El entered the teacher's lounge and she almost sighs in relief – the fewer eyes that are on her and Mike, the better.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" Mike asks a couple of seconds later.

El takes a sip of her coffee, cringing a bit at the bite of the temperature. "I just...." She sighs, glancing up at him. "Is everything ok?" she asks. "You seem a little tense...or angry."

Mike looks down at her as they round a corner, mere feet from her office, and he breathes out a laugh. "Yeah, yeah, I'm ok. Just...got a lot on my mind right now."

They stop in front of her office door and El turns to face him, looking up at him, searching for *something*, she's not sure what – a sign, a clue, just *something*. "Well, if you want to talk about, you know I'm always here to listen, yeah?"

There's a long pause, a heavy beat, while they just *look* at each other, gazes locked. But then Mike looks down, lips curling up in a soft smile that somehow also looks kind of sad and it makes El's heart squeeze painfully in her chest. "Yeah, I know." He looks back up at her, his gaze fond. "Thank you."

"Any time," El says, 100% meaning it. God, she thinks she would do *anything* for him.

The sadness lifts a bit from Mike's smile and there's a bit of a sparkle in his eyes as he lets out another, quiet laugh. "Right," he says. "Well, I should get back to class. Got a Chem lab to oversee."

El nods, the motion feeling a little jerky, a little too upbeat. “Yeah, right, sure.” She pauses, biting her lip again. “Hey, we’re still on for lunch, yeah?”

There’s *another* pause, just as heavy and thick, so thick, with a tension that manages to be both suffocating and alienating at the same time. But Mike nods in return a moment later and the tension fades just enough so El can breathe. “Yeah, of course we are. Why wouldn’t we be?” Mike says, grinning. “I mean, who else am I going to talk to about nerdy shit?” Mike’s words are spoken with the normal light and teasing tone that most of their conversations are filled with...and El can’t help but feel it’s a little forced.

But still, she smiles, unable to stop from sighing in relief. “Good. See you in a while, then.”

Mike’s grin stretches a bit wider into a full on smile. “Yep, see you then.” He gives her a small wave before he walks away, not looking back as he heads back to his classroom.

El watches him go, wishing she felt better about that conversation, wishing that she didn’t feel a lot like the past couple of days have been one step forward and two steps back.

Well, maybe more like one and a half steps back, if that’s possible.

But, regardless of how many steps back, there’s one thing that’s absolutely true: something is *very* wrong and she wishes, more than anything, that she knew how to make it right.

It’s been two days. Two days since El came back from being sick. Two days of stopping by her office in the morning and having lunch with her, two days of getting back into the rhythm of their normal back-and-forth texting, two days of feeling like *nothing* has changed when *everything* has changed.

Mike hates it.

He hates it so much, he's on the verge of fucking *losing* it.

Because, all throughout those two days, it feels like Mike's a hair's breadth away from having everything collapse out from under his feet due to the sheer weight of the awkward tension and uncertain waiting between him and El.

That first lunch with her on Tuesday is the worst of it, their conversation stilted, the air a lot nervous – like they're acquaintances or just getting to know each other again. Their pauses are bit too long, their laughter a bit too awkward. But they manage to get through it alright and, by the end of it, things almost feel back to normal.

Almost.

It's a little better on Wednesday – their words a little freer, smiles a little more relaxed – and by Thursday, it feels like it's settling into a new pattern, one where the pauses are too heavy in the wrong way, where there's a bit of hesitation in every word, every smile. It's not the way Mike thought this week would go. Not by a long-shot.

(there was supposed to be kissing. a lot of kissing.)

The way El looks at him isn't helping, either - like she's *waiting* for something or trying to decipher him, all expectant and unsure. It makes Mike want to ask her what the hell she's looking for, what she's trying to understand. All she has to do is *ask* and he would give her anything.

To add to all of this, it's like Mike and El are living in a giant Petri dish or under a microscope. Mike can't go two steps without feeling everyone's eyes on him, like they're eager, waiting with bated breath, for *something* to happen, something Mike's not sure is *ever* going to happen.

Mike knows the gossip that's been swirling around about the two of them. Hell, El knows it too, from the way she can't stop glancing at everyone when there are others around, every inch of her tense and worried. It's freaking Mike out because he doesn't know *why*. Is she worried about people pairing them up, like she's embarrassed to be

thought of as romantically attached to him? Or is she just annoyed, like he is, at the way no one has any sense of decency or privacy or shame? Mostly, it's the fact that Mike can't tell which is what worries him the most.

So, the days go by, uncomfortable in the same way that a pair of shoes half a size too small is: ill-fitting, a little bit chafing, and frustratingly stifling.

And, by Thursday afternoon, Mike's had enough of it.

Lunch with El was...ok, he guesses – they chatted a lot about final exams and her last few Nutcracker performances, a little about Christmas shopping. Just more of the past couple of days, really, that new pattern establishing itself.

There's nothing specific that triggers the realization in Mike that he's had enough. In fact, he's in the middle of teaching Physics when it hits him, like a small lightbulb in the back of his head, a tiny ping that somehow manages to reverberate across every inch of his body and soul.

Literally, one second he's fine, halfway through a lecture about electromagnetism. And the next – like there's a threshold of tolerance and it's simply the passage of time that carries him over – almost all he can think about is *I need to talk to her*. He needs to tell her...*what*, he's not sure, just that he needs to do it *right now*.

But he can't right now. He has two more classes to teach *and* El has dance class to teach during last block until they're both free. So it's just going to have to wait a couple of hours.

Which just gives him time to think about what he wants to say.

The next couple of hours go by in a blur and, by the time Mike's in his last class of the day (Honors Chem), he's just about had it. He lets class out 10 minutes early ("An early Christmas gift from me to you," is what he says, not willing to give them the real explanation) and, once the students are all out of the room, he gathers his things so he can make his way down to the dance studio to wait for El's dance class to wrap up.

It's freezing outside while he waits, but it's ok because the cold helps clarify his thinking, helps him focus on what he wants to say, *how* he wants to say it – that he's sorry for how weird things have been, that he wants them to go back to where they were before, that he didn't mean to make things awkward, that he's sorry their coworkers and students are making everything awkward.

Mike waits for a few minutes, hands stuffed in his pockets, shoulders hunched to preserve body heat, until the door to the dance studio opens and he ducks behind the corner of the building as the students, mostly girls, file out in rapid succession, all teenage laughter and bright chatter. He gives it a few more seconds after he hears the door shut before he heads inside, hoping that luck is on his side and that El's still in there.

That she's *alone*.

Someone must be looking out for him because, somehow, luck *is* on his side and when Mike opens the door, El's the only one in the room. He steps in, letting the door close behind him, and takes a moment to just *look* at her before she notices he's there.

El's wearing her usual teaching dress – a black, long-sleeved, tight lycra dress that hits her just above the knee, the wide neck showing off her collarbones, the fabric showing off every curve of her body, skirt swirling lightly around her legs – and she's fiddling with the sound system up against the wall mere feet from the door, her face a picture of contemplative concentration.

Pretty, Mike's brain whispers, the thought jolting his every nerve, and he gulps before he clears his throat to get her attention.

El gives a start and turns quickly towards him, her eyes wide, expression startled. It only takes her a heartbeat to recognize him and her brow furrows. "Mike? What are you doing here?"

The smile that Mike gives El is shaky at best and he's never felt so much like an awkward wastoid in his entire life. But he's here, standing in front of her, and he's *needs* to talk to her almost more than he needs air. "I wanted to talk to you. About something that's been on my mind for the past few days." El opens her mouth to

speak, but Mike holds up a hand, palm facing her, an entreaty to stop. “No, please, just...let me talk, ok? I need – I need to get this out.”

There’s a pause before El nods and she’s staring at him, eyes wide but with no other hint of what she’s thinking, a careful mask painted on her face that has Mike swallowing roughly, his throat dry, while the nervous energy running through him ramps up another notch.

But, still, she nodded, *agreeing*, and Mike starts talking. “I...” Mike trails off, voice weak, sounding more like a deflating balloon than a person. He clears his throat and tries again. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I know things between us have been weird, *really* weird, and I’m sorry. I just....” A pause, a brief glance down at his feet before looking back at her. “I got too stuck in my own head and I made things weird, I made you feel weird and, for that, I’m so sorry. I want things to go back to where they were before, when it was good, when there wasn’t this giant elephant in the room. And I hate it, hate that I know it’s there, that you know it’s there. I hate feeling like the other shoe is about to drop every second of every day.” Mike stops to take a breath and to gauge El’s reaction, but so far, her face is mostly unchanged, except her eyes are a little wider and her mouth has fallen open with...shock? Disbelief? Confusion? Mike doesn’t know. But, he soldiers on, unable to fully stop now that he’s gotten going.

“I know it’s been awkward and I hate it. And I know that everyone constantly staring at us isn’t helping, either. It’s just-” Mike cuts off as the memory of Melanie telling him that she thinks he and El would be good together and it mixes with all the other whispers he’s heard over the past few days, the gossip about what’s going on between him and El, all hopeful and fascinated.

Mike can’t help it: he laughs, a dry, almost manic laugh that tears out of him like a thunderclap, and the words that come out his mouth next, he has *no* control over. “Apparently, people think we’d be good together, you and me. Hell, Melanie and her little posse seem to have been trying to set us up for the past few months and I can’t tell you how many sly little questions and backhanded comments I’ve gotten from people trying to figure out if there’s something going on between us. And I’m sorry for that, too. I know it’s awkward and weird, being gossiped about, and I wish I could stop them, but I can’t.”

But also, I feel like I haven't helped, either, you know?"

At this point, something in Mike's brain begins to panic. *Wait, what are you saying?* But his heart is in control now and there's a direct line from there to his mouth that his brain has absolutely no say over.

"I feel like I must have been really obvious to make everyone think that there's something between us, something that would cause all the gossip and make the students want to set us up."

Ok, you can stop now.

"It's just...it's flattering, you know? That someone would look at the two of us and think 'Yes, I can see it', think that there would be, *could* be more than friendship."

No, wait, we're not ready for this, this is too much!

"But mostly it's flattering because you're *amazing*, El. You're beautiful and kind and funny. You're an amazing dancer, you're just so fucking talented, and you care about the students so much. Everything you do amazes me. Anyone would be lucky to be with you. *I* would be lucky to be with you." Mike's throat closes up, casting the room into near silence, the only sounds in the room his panicked breathing and the sharp intake of breath that he hears coming from El. Feeling his cheeks heat up, Mike closes his eyes and tries to ignore the hot embarrassment that crawls down his spine. Oh god, did he just all but admit that he's in love with her?

Why yes, yes he did.

Eyes still closed, Mike pulls in a deep breath and tries to make the flush on his cheeks disappear, but he knows there's nothing he can do about that. He also knows that he can't just slink away at this point, that he needs to say *something* to follow that up. So, he pretends to be braver than he actually feels and opens his eyes.

For a second, though, he can only stare at El. She's still looking at him, but her expression is now one of full-blown shock – mouth hanging open, a flush high on her cheekbones, eyebrows arching towards her hairline – with her hands hanging limp by her sides, the

rest of her rooted where she stands. It's an expression that tells Mike *nothing* of what El's feeling and the way his heart pangs at the realization is almost painful. God, he practically admitted he's in love with her; would it be too much to get a hint either way of what she's feeling?

But the silence between them is dragging on and the discomfort of it slithers through Mike's veins. "Anyway," he says, clearing his throat, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I just wanted to let you know... all of that. You don't need to say anything, right now. Just...." Mike sighs. "If we could just...stop being awkward tomorrow, I would really love that." He eyes El once more, trying to get a hint of *any* change in her expression. But, nothing. "Right, ok," he says with a nod. "I'll...see you tomorrow." He smiles, or tries to at any rate. "Night, El."

And, without waiting for El to respond or move or *anything*, Mike turns and hightails it out of the dance studio, heart pounding in his chest like he's just run a marathon, resolutely *not* looking back as he crosses the parking lot to his car. He doesn't want to see if El's tried to follow – *can't*, actually. Because he just used up all the bravery he doesn't actually have and he knows he doesn't have it in him to face the worst case scenarios his mind is frantically spinning – El mad at him, or disgusted, or *worse*... pitying him, for reaching so far out of his league, for being unable to control his feelings, for *any* of it.

The tremble in Mike's hands as he reaches for his keys has nothing to do with the cold that wraps around his body and he's still shaking even after he gets into the car, hands fumbling to turn the key. While the engine warms up, Mike leans over, practically slumping, and rests his forehead on the steering wheel.

*Great job, Wheeler. Way to make things even **more** awkward.*

But, regardless of the way the embarrassment of what just happened settles uncomfortably in his stomach, Mike is a little relieved. Because, at the very least, he said *something*. Granted, it wasn't what he set out to say – it was a lot more, in fact – but still, he did it. And, good or bad, the ball's in El's court, now, for her to do whatever she wants with it.

Mike just wishes he knew what that was going to be.

El doesn't think she's ever been more shocked in her entire life. Not when her dad started dating again after divorcing her mom and she walked in on him and his then-new girlfriend making out; not when she found out she got accepted to the ABT; not even when she found out Santa Claus wasn't real when she was 6.

No, this is a whole new level of shock, the kind of shock that freezes her where she stands and renders her mute, making her feel like she can't breathe.

Because the man she's fallen in love with seems to just have admitted that he, too, has feelings for her, in the weirdest, most roundabout way possible.

And she just *stood there* like an absolute mouthbreather.

Well, shit.

El can't seem to do anything other than stare in shock as Mike walks out of the dance studio. But his departure cues the room to suddenly fill back up with oxygen and El sucks in a desperate, gasping breath, her body thawing, movement seeping back into her limbs. Immediately, one of El's hands comes up to press over her heart, which is beating frantically in her chest, while the other stumbles out to grip the cabinet with the sound system in it to help keep her upright. Her knees feel week, her whole body trembling with emotion.

El doesn't walk after Mike – *can't* really. She knows that if she tries, her knees will give out on her, she feels so overwhelmed. So, she stands there, clutching the cabinet until her knuckles turn white, and feels like the biggest ninny on the face of the planet.

All of that about being better face-to-face? A complete fucking lie.

So, yeah, El's pretty sure Mike just confessed that he feels the same

way about her that she does about him, that he doesn't want things to be awkward between them anymore...and she let him walk away without saying, *doing*, anything in response.

God, she's an idiot.

It takes El way too long to get to a point where she doesn't need to hold on to anything to keep her upright and, when she feels steady enough, she immediately rushes to grab her purse, to get her phone.

Not to call or text Mike – god, after what he just said, he doesn't deserve her awkward attempts at over-the-phone conversation, be it speech or text – no, El's fingers immediately go to Max's number, hitting the screen so hard, her finger leaves a greasy smudge across the surface.

El's still trembling, still so very overwhelmed, as she presses the phone against her ear and turns to lean against one of the mirrors, slowly sliding down to the ground while the phone rings and she waits for Max to pick up.

Max picks up just after third ring. “Ellie? Everything ok? You’re calling during work, hon.” Max’s voice is concerned, a little frantic.

And embarrassment ripples down El’s spine. God, she forgot about Max’s job. “Oh god, I’m sorry, you’re still at work,” El all but moans. “God, never mind. I’ll call you back later. I’m sorry, I-”

“Hey, no, no, it’s ok, I’m not busy. Just concerned,” Max says, hurried but soft, gentle. “What’s going on? You sound....”

While Max casts about for a word, El seizes the moment and speaks. “I’m pretty sure Mike just told me he has feelings for me and I stood there like an idiot, Max. And then he walked away and I didn’t say anything and, *oh god*, I’m the biggest loser on the face of the planet.” Despair is beginning to settle in, mixing dangerously with the shock and excitement that are coursing through her, and it’s dizzying, the conflicting emotions that war in her veins.

There’s a good solid beat of silence before Max lets out a coughing breath, sounding a bit shocked herself. “Uh, wow, um...wow.”

El whines and lets her head lean back to thump against the glass mirror. “*I know*. Who decided it was a good idea for me to be allowed to have romantic feelings for *anyone*? A horrible idea, the *worst*. I’m so bad at this stuff, Max. I just went all deer-in-headlights and now he probably thinks I don’t like him back and-”

“Woah, ok, back that train up,” Max says, cutting El off. “You don’t know that’s what he thinks and jumping to conclusions isn’t helping you at all right now. And you’re allowed to have feelings for people, El. You’re allowed to want to be happy. So, yeah, you haven’t had the best luck in the romance department. But who’s to say that can’t change right now?” Max pauses, taking a breath that El can hear from the other end of the line. “You *know* now, El. You know he has feelings for you – he told you himself, or at least you’re pretty sure he did. You should be *excited*. Because it means your feelings are reciprocated. He put himself out there, El. You need to seize the moment and return the favor. Don’t leave him hanging and just *go for it*.”

Max’s words speed up the beating of El’s heart, the excitement from the picture Max is painting for her drowning out everything else, overshadowing her fear and making it seem irrelevant, obsolete. Because Max is *right*. This is it. This is *her* moment. This is what she’s been waiting for. The opportunity of a lifetime, everything she’s ever wanted, is within her grasp.

And she’s going to go after it with *everything* she’s got.

Mike gets home from work and all he wants to do is crawl into bed, bury himself under the covers and *never* come out.

God, he feels like 10 different kinds of fool, at least.

First, there’s him accidentally and practically confessing that he’s in love with El when all he wanted to do was apologize and rewind the clock a few days. Then, there’s the fact that he ran away after like a fucking coward instead of waiting to hear what she had to say or

doing something even more drastic like kissing her.

But, mostly it's that he's fallen in love with El in the first place *and* that he doesn't seem to regret it despite the turmoil of the past few days. Realistically, Mike doesn't think he'll ever regret falling in love with El, but he has to admit the last few days have been a rollercoaster of emotion he could have very easily handled not experiencing.

Mike walks through his front door and all but throws himself down on the couch, feeling both bummed out and excited in a way that's just exhausting.

And then Mike remembers that he has plans with the rest of the Party and the groan he lets out sounds more like it belongs to a moody teenager than a grown man.

Yeah, this isn't happening tonight, Mike thinks with a sigh as he shifts enough so he can pull his phone out of his pocket and send them a message on their group chat. *Hey guys, gotta bail tonight* – which is the truth since Mike *cannot* handle company right now – *My editor is giving me shit and I need to focus on getting him something* – also true, just...not the reason he's bailing – *Sorry for the last minute change. Raincheck?*

Mike hits send and throws his phone to the other end of the couch where it falls in between a couple of pillows. Good, maybe he won't hear it vibrate when the rest of them text him back all annoyed that he's cancelling on them.

Plus, he won't have to be confronted with the fact that he just *lied* to his best friends. Oh, sure, everything Mike said was true. It's just that the cause and effect in the message are not at all related. But he also knows that he won't survive hanging out with his friends tonight. They'll take one look at him and just *know* and Mike will have to confess everything and he's so not ready to deal with the onslaught. He just *can't*. Not after today.

No, he's going to hide instead, slinking away like a dog with its tail between its legs, and try to gather up the courage to go to work tomorrow.

Real mature, Wheeler. Fantastic job at adulting. A-fucking-plus.

Mike lets himself wallow in his self-induced pity for another couple of minutes before he forces himself to get up from the couch with the intent of going to grab his laptop. Maybe if he gets some writing done, he'll feel a little less like a liar.

So, the night passes with all the speed of molasses and the smoothness of barbed wire. Mike manages to get some writing done, but it's horrible and he knows it. He's distracted and prickly and feeling like he wants to chuck his laptop out the window just so he can be done with all of this.

He doesn't, though – it's a \$2,000 gaming laptop, he's so not tossing it out the window – but the feeling of wanting to do *something* to release the maelstrom storming inside of him is fierce and almost overwhelming, so Mike searches for something to do to help calm himself down. His mind immediately lands on a run. It's too cold to run outside, so Mike settles on packing up his running clothes and heading to the gym.

He runs on the treadmill at blistering speeds for almost an hour, until he has a stitch in his side, sweat dripping down his face and the back of his neck, soaking his shirt, coating his skin.

And, while it helps ease the urgency and frustration, the run does nothing to ease his anxiety.

Because Mike's *scared*. Scared of seeing El again, scared of how she's going to react when he sees her again. Is she going to be mad at him? Or hit him? Or tell him that she doesn't feel the same, that they can no longer be friends?

Or will it be the opposite? Will she tell him that she wants to be *more* than friends?

God, he hopes.

But Mike can't let himself believe. He doesn't know if he can afford to get his hopes up if they're going to be cruelly dashed the next day.

So, after showering at the gym, Mike goes home and, exhausted from

his run and weighed down by anxiety, falls into a dreamless sleep.

When he wakes, he's still exhausted, still anxious...

...Still so *fucking* nervous.

It's all he can think about as he gets ready for work, what's about to happen, *if* anything happens. Mike's fully aware that today's the last day before winter break and if *nothing* happens today, it might be weeks until the next time something can. And he doesn't know if he can handle waiting that long for this to resolve itself, however it does. Because something has to give – something's *about* to give, he just knows it.

It's thoughts like these that, mixed with his anxious nervousness, make him feel numb, like he's slightly detached from the world around him or floating through a hazy fog without any way of telling where the way out is.

Of course, that lasts until the moment he parks his car and realizes that, *holy shit*, he has to walk inside the building. Where El is. Because she's *here* – he parked only a few spots down from where her car is, so he knows she's here.

Oh god, he's not ready to see her.

Mike gulps and tightens his fingers on the steering wheel, feeling the hard leather creak beneath his grip. He can't see her right now, he just can't.

He knows it makes him the biggest wuss on the face of the planet, but when Mike goes inside, he purposefully skips walking by El's office. He just needs a little more time to gather himself, to steel himself for the inevitable.

Because while he knows he can fairly safely skip stopping by El's office in the morning – after his confession yesterday, surely she can understand why – there's no way he can skip lunch, not when he's the one who said he wanted things to go back to normal.

So, no, Mike's going to have to suck it up and be ready to see her once lunch comes around. Whether he likes it or not, whether he's

actually *ready* or not.

The morning passes by in the same blur that came over him while he was getting ready, only this time, he's hyperaware that El is only feet away, relatively speaking – she's just down the hall and he can *feel* her presence like he can just reach out and touch it. He can feel her *everywhere* and it's more than overwhelming; it's almost unbearable.

Of course, when lunch finally comes around, Mike's *still* not ready to see her. But he sucks it up and grabs the lunch he brought with him – a simple peanut butter sandwich since he wasn't really in any sort of shape to think any harder than that – before walking down the hall and wishing he didn't feel like a prisoner on his way to the gallows.

Which makes his sigh of relief when Mike spots El in her office with a student palpably shameful. The young girl, a freshman probably, is sitting with her hands in her lap, fingers twisting, and El's sitting next to her, having traded her seat behind her desk for one of the chairs in front of it. Her back's to Mike while she talks in low tones to the girl she's trying to console and he's glad, glad she can't see him, glad he doesn't have to pretend to be normal when she looks at him.

Instead, he can just stare at El, drinking in the sight of her hair, loose and wavy down her back and shoulders, of her pale blue blouse that fits so nicely along the lines of her torso, to the glimpse of her bare calves he can see from beneath the chair, telling him that she's wearing a skirt today.

She's so, so beautiful and Mike realizes, with a hard, painful thump inside his chest, his heart pounding hard against his ribcage, that she's dressed up on a Friday, when everyone else is dressed more casually in anticipation not just of the weekend, but of the impending three week break.

And he can't help but wonder: *is she dressed up for him?*

Hope sprouts wings like tiny butterflies in his stomach and Mike turns to head back to his classroom to eat in peace, feeling buoyed. For the first time in days, it feels like, the anxiety that courses through him isn't born from fear, but from *excitement* and he hopes that he's not setting himself up for disappointment.

He'll see her after school's over, he decides, once he's done with classes for the day. He'll be ready then, he just *knows* it, and it'll give him time to adjust to the new hope that seems to be infecting every inch of him.

So, naturally, once Mike's made up his mind about a course of action, it all goes to shit almost immediately.

It happens during the block after lunch, about halfway through. Mike's teaching his second of his two Chem lectures and he's pretty much just keeping an eye on the students while they half-ass their way through a worksheet about acids and bases when there's a knock on his classroom door.

Mike, and pretty much every student, turns to see El standing in the doorway. And his heart just *leaps* into his throat and he has to gulp against the feeling while every warning bell goes off in the back of his head.

El's standing there, looking at him with the most inscrutable look on her face, features carefully composed into a hard mask, giving absolutely nothing away. "Mr. Wheeler, I need to see you in the hall for a moment." Her voice, like her face, is hard, leaving no room for argument and those warning bells becoming blaring klaxons.

Shit, she's pissed. Well, there goes all my hope, Mike thinks as disappointment begins to build inside of him.

A low "oooh," ripples through the room and Mike turns to level a stern glare at everyone. "Keep working. I'll be back in just a minute." Something in his voice must give no room for argument, either, because his entire Chem class looks back down at their papers.

With a deep breath, Mike gets up from the lab stool he's perched on and wipes his suddenly sweaty palms on his jeans before he moves to head out to the hallway. El turns to walk in front of him when she sees him stand and he takes the moment as he follows her out to just *stare* at her once more before she turns him down and tears him a new one.

He was right earlier, she *is* wearing a skirt, a tight dark grey skirt that

clings to the shape of her hips and thighs in a way that makes his mouth water and he chides himself for checking her out when she's just about to kill every hope and dream he's ever had.

But Mike knows he's *never* going to stop being attracted to El, no matter what, and he's just going to have to figure out a way to manage this for the rest of his life.

As Mike steps through the doorway, he turns to pull the door shut behind him – really, whatever he can do to limit the potential audience size for the metaphysical murder that's about to happen.

For a brief moment, Mike closes his eyes, still facing the door, and takes a deep breath before he feels ready to face her. "El," he says as he starts to turn, apology building on his lips – might as well see if he can soften some of the blow he's about to receive. "I'm so sorry, I—"

But Mike never gets to finish his apology. Because the second he looks down at El, she steps forward, hand reaching out to grab him by the front of his shirt, tugging him down as she pushes up-

-And then she's kissing him, her mouth on his, lips soft and pliant and warm and *holy shit, she's actually kissing him.*

For a moment that lasts only a couple rapid beats of his heart, but might as well be an eternity, Mike can only *feel* as he's frozen in place, stunned into immobility. Every inch of him just *explodes* with sensation from the sheer pleasure of her mouth on his. It's more than he ever could have dreamed of – her lips soft and warm and oh so tempting as her mouth slowly fuses to his; the sweet scent of her perfume; the slight warmth of her hand on his chest; the feel of her body curving beneath his as she reaches up for his mouth. His heart pounds furiously in his chest, his head spinning, and he thinks that he could die a happy man *just* from knowing, *finally knowing*, what her mouth feels like against his.

But, the moment passes and Mike realizes that he's just been standing there, shell-shocked, practically motionless when he could be kissing her back.

So kiss her back, you idiot.

And he does, his eyes slipping shut as he returns the gentle pressure of her lips against his, his soul soaring as he hears El's quiet intake of breath, a soft gasp that he finds himself chasing with the slightest shift in the angle of his mouth on hers until his lips are slanting hard against hers. His hands find their way to her – one to her hip, smooth curve pressed neatly against his palm, while the other goes to her shoulder, hand sliding up so he can cup the side of her neck. He manages to bite back a groan at the feel of her soft skin beneath his palm, the rapid hummingbird's beat of her pulse against the base of his thumb, and the cool silk of her hair brushing against the backs of his fingers.

But then Mike feels El slide the hand that's on his chest down so that she can curl her fingers around his ribcage while her other comes up to cling tightly to his bicep, right above the elbow, her touch igniting waves of fire in its wake, and the groan escapes him anyway, rumbling low in his chest, resonating deeply with the heat that's just beginning to boil in his veins.

Mike feels El shiver against him – the way her body trembles in his arms is just about the most deliciously sinful thing he's *ever* felt – and he goes to kiss her even harder, to make her *more* than tremble....

But she pulls away a breath later, gasping as she does so, and Mike feels suddenly bereft without the feel of her mouth against his, lost and dazed and craving, *needing* to feel it again. He stares down at her, awash in a sea of dizzying emotion: whiplash from being brought so high after being so low mere seconds ago; the kaleidoscope bursts of happiness that explode beneath his skin, popping like champagne in his veins; sheer, overwhelming relief that he hadn't been misreading her this entire time.

But, mostly, he's captivated by the look on El's face – cheeks flushed, lips parted and glistening from their shared kisses, eyes wide and filled with sparkling happiness with a hint of something deeper just underneath, something *darker*, suffused with heat and rich with promise.

El's lips – those beautiful, lush, *sinful* lips – curve up in the smallest of smiles as she takes a half a step back, eyebrow quirking coyly. The look on her face is inviting and hopeful all at the same time while she

slides from his grip, his fingertips trailing against her hip and neck, until his hands *ache* with the immediate loss of feeling her beneath his touch.

El holds his gaze for a long, heavy moment, neither of them saying anything, before she turns and walks away, leaving Mike in a cruel daze of frustrated desire, his eyes unable to keep from tracking the sway of her hips, the bounce of her hair, the smooth grace of her legs.

It's only once El disappears around the corner that Mike feels like he can breathe again and he sucks in a deep, shaky breath. It feels like an hour since Mike stepped out into the hallway, but it's really only been a couple of minutes – a couple of minutes that has *completely* changed everything.

And, his own lips stretching in a soft smile, tongue flicking out to taste the remnants of her mouth on his, Mike turns and heads back into his classroom.

Suddenly, he cannot *wait* for the day to be over.

Can. Not. Wait.

El spends the rest of the afternoon lost in a daze of her own making and she spends more time replaying the kiss and the moments surrounding it than she does doing actual work.

Guess it's a good thing it's the last day before winter break, then, for as useful as she is right now.

Luckily, no one stops by her office at all for the rest of the afternoon, which just gives her *more* time to let the instant replay that's been set up in her brain loop over and over again.

God, she can't believe that she actually *kissed* him, El thinks with a goofy smile as she tries to focus on checking her email.

Ok, that's totally a lie. El can totally believe she actually kissed him. What she *can't* believe, though, is that she managed to gather up the courage to do so.

When she got to work that morning, she'd been eager, excited, feeling like her skin would never stop buzzing with anticipation. She had a plan, a good plan: when Mike stopped by her office in his way in, she was going to tell him that she also thought they would be good together, to echo the words he spoke to her yesterday.

But then he never stopped by.

El couldn't blame him, really – she *had* stared at him like an idiot as he practically poured his heart out to her. She'd want a little distance too, if she was in his shoes.

I'll see him during lunch, she thought, thinking everything would still be fine, that she could still execute her plan.

And then Stacey Velleman came into her office right before lunch, all hand-wringing anxiety and mere moments away from crying, panicking about how she didn't know how to keep on top of her school work and not forget anything for finals during winter break.

For a split second, El had let herself wallow in the disappointment that came over her – *god dammit, now she was never going to be able to talk to Mike* – before she pushed aside her own emotions and focused on doing her job. Because there was a scared little girl in need of her help and, *dammit*, El was going to help her.

It didn't help, though, that a few minutes later, El could have *sworn* that she felt Mike standing just outside her office, like she'd developed a supernatural sixth sense for him. He wasn't there when she turned a few moments later, but it was still enough to set her on edge, even as she made sure to stay calm and reassuring for the girl in front of her.

By the time Stacey was in a good place to head off to class, it was a minute before the bell at the end of lunch and El couldn't help the little whine that sounded in the back of her throat that there wasn't enough time, resigning herself to the fact that there was *never* going

to be time, frustration building inside of her.

Even now, El's still not sure exactly when she decided to essentially say "fuck it". She'd been sitting in her office, maybe 20 minutes into the block just after lunch. All she knows is that one moment, she was wallowing in disappointment and, the next, she was getting to her feet, having had enough, like a switch had been flipped inside of her, her frustration tipping her over the edge and, suddenly, she knew what she was going to do. What she *had* to do.

She was going to seize the moment.

God, everything about the 4 minutes that followed are forever going to be seared in El's memory – the determined walk to Mike's classroom; the feel of the hardwood door as she rapped her knuckles against it; the look on his face when she said she needed to talk to him, scared and crestfallen and panicked-

(she knows it's because of the tone of her voice and the look on her face when she stood in the doorway, knows that it's because she looked angry and unyielding, but it's because it was the only way she was going to keep it together long enough to follow through on what she was about to do)

-and then, after he shut the door behind him and turned around, the way that he froze when she finally, *finally*, pulled him towards her and kissed him like she'd been dreaming about for months (she can't blame him for freezing, she really can't. *Anyone* would have been surprised, really).

It was, hands down, the best first kiss of her entire life – his lips warm and full against hers, the clean smell of him filling her, surrounding her, the warmth of his body not even an inch away from hers, the firm plane of his chest beneath her palm.

And when Mike kissed her back? El almost *fainted* as his mouth shifted against hers, slanting at the most delicious angle, while he moved to touch her, searing hands on her hip and her neck, causing her to shiver, palm slightly calloused and hot, so hot against her bare skin where he cupped her neck. She'd let herself touch him in return, then, feeling the glide of his chest as beneath her palm as she slid her hand to wrap around his ribcage, letting herself clutch onto his bicep

like she'd been dreaming about doing, feeling the muscle there, lean and firm, jump at her touch.

She'd only pulled away a moment later because, if she didn't, she would have never stopped. Breaking that kiss was the hardest thing she'd ever done and the look on his face after she pulled away had only made her want to dive right back in, to kiss him and never, *ever* stop. Because he looked at her like he couldn't believe she was real, like she was everything he ever could have wanted.

But, he had classes to teach and they couldn't stand out in the hallway kissing for the rest of the afternoon despite how much she'd wanted to.

So, she just looked back at him, hoping he was picking up the way she was looking at him – open, inviting, almost pleading – before she stepped back and walked away, feeling like her heart got further and further away with every step.

Now she's sitting here, trying and miserably failing to stop from thinking about it, knowing that the end of the day can't come soon enough...knowing that, when the day's over, she'll see Mike again.

She's so excited, she feels like she might pass out.

But the afternoon ticks by at a frustratingly, excruciatingly slow pace and it's driving El *crazy*.

It's so bad that by the time she's down to the last 15 minutes before the final bell of the day, all El can do is sit with her head in her hands and *wait*, trying to steady herself with slow, deep breaths.

Which makes the knock at her door a few moments later so goddamn frustrating and El want to scream. *No, god no.* She swallows the groan that bubbles up in her throat and sighs. "Come in," she says, not lifting her head from her hands, not wanting to look until it's absolutely necessary.

And then she hears the sound of her door shutting, followed swiftly by the decisive click of the lock.

Confused, El lifts her head and gasps when she sees Mike standing

there, facing the door. El rushes to her feet, tripping a bit on eager legs as she steps clear of her desk. She takes a second to look at him before he turns around – the breadth of his shoulders are set in a tense, rigid line, and the way he holds himself, ramrod straight, speaks to a man who's barely in control right now.

El draws in a shaky breath. “Mike?” she says, her voice taking on a high, breathy pitch that makes her sound almost desperate. But, when he turns around and looks at her, El finds that she doesn’t care about how she sounds. Because Mike’s looking at her like all he wants to do is *devour* her, Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows roughly, his eyes dark and wanting – no, *needy*.

Before El can say anything, before she can even gather her thoughts, it’s like she blinks and then Mike’s right there in front of her, hands reaching for her, sliding into her hair and tipping up her face, before he leans over and kisses her like there’s no one watching. Because no one *is* watching.

His mouth is hot on hers, hot and eager, *pleading*, and, *oh god*, El feels like she’s going to explode. She kisses him back with equal fervor, pushing up to press herself against him, to feel the firm lines of his body against the soft curves of her own. Her hands move to clutch at his sides, gripping him tight, fingers fisting in his shirt, and her fingernails scrape against his sides through the fabric.

Mike moans against her mouth, the sound reverberating inside of her, and El answers with a whimpering gasp that she feels with every fiber of her being. Then one of Mike’s hands tightens in her hair, his own fingernails scraping against her scalp, and El practically forgets her own name. She arches against him, hands trailing up to curve up and around his shoulders from beneath, holding him as close to her as she can with the layers of clothes between them. The friction of their breathing is the most delicious kind of torture and El can’t help the way she moans at the drag of his chest against hers, her blood slowly boiling as desire rushes through her, hot and wanting.

But it’s not a want that’s building inside of her, though – it’s a *need*, a need so overwhelming, El feels like she’s going to spontaneously combust at a moment’s notice.

More, she needs more. More is the only thing that will keep her from alighting into flames, more is the only thing that will keep her sated, whole.

With another moan, El opens her mouth beneath the onslaught of Mike's kisses, his mouth teasing and tugging at hers, and she sweeps her tongue out to lick at his lips, needy and beseeching. Mike shudders in response before he opens his mouth against hers, letting El brush her tongue against his so that she can taste the inside of his mouth, and the returning caress of his tongue, full of hedonistic promise, sends shivers down her spine that are so violent, El's feels like she's about to vibrate out of her own skin.

For a few glorious, *amazing* minutes, there is only this – their mouths moving against each other, parted lips and caressing tongues and nipping teeth, accompanied by the sounds of breathy moans and pleasurable gasps.

But then, and El's not sure who starts this, they're turning, turning so that El is pressed against the edge of her desk, trapped by the weight of Mike's body, hot and hard against hers. El gasps as she feels Mike's hands leave her hair, one of them stopping to cup her neck, but other traveling down her back, thumb grazing against her side through the thin fabric of her blouse, leaving a trail of shivers in his wake, before landing on the curve between her hip and waist, fingers splayed against the small of her back. She feels the curve between his thumb and forefinger push at her, nudging her, and El takes the cue, sliding up and onto the desk so that she's perched just on the edge.

Immediately, El understands why. She's a few inches taller seated on the desk, which, thankfully, reduces the strain in her neck at having to reach up to kiss Mike.

But, also, even more thankfully, this gives Mike the space to drag his lips from her mouth so he can trail them up along her jaw, leaving teasing, nipping kisses along the delicate edge, tongue darting out to soothe the pleasurable pain he leaves in his wake. The hand on El's neck curls around the back, nudging her so that her head tilts to one side, giving Mike the access he is so obviously asking for so he can guide his mouth to the triangle of skin beneath her ear and behind her jaw. He flicks his tongue out before sucking on the skin – lightly,

not enough to leave a mark, but enough to draw a keening whine from El's throat, followed by the desperate sound of his name leaving her mouth in a gasping cry. Mike answers with a low moan before he attacks the skin of her neck with even more fervor, lips leaving hot, suckling kisses up and down along the skin between her ear and her shoulder.

El's hands rush to grab at him, fingers wrapping around his biceps, grip curling into his skin, in an attempt to anchor herself to *something*. Because every inch of her feels like it's about to melt. The feel of his mouth on her neck, lips teasing and pulling, is driving her *wild*, until almost all she can think about is never wanting this to stop. God, she wants him. She wants him so bad it makes her want to throw all caution to the wind, to find out, right here and now, what his skin feels like against hers, what it feels like to have nothing between them, to be joined in the way her body so *desperately* craves.

No, too much. Not here, not now, the only thinking portion of her brain whispers, a warning that she's heading for the point of no return, when logic will have no more say, when she'll only be able to heed need and sensation and nothing else.

Using her shoulder, El nudges Mike's head away from the crook of her neck, sparing a second to look up at him in wide-eyed wonder – *god, he's beautiful*, all swollen lips and dark eyes and flushed cheeks – before she reaches up to pull him back down, her mouth catching his as her hand slides up into his hair, feeling the thick locks weave between her fingers, her hand cupping the back of his head. It feels like Mike just *melts* into the kiss and he groans against her mouth, hovering over her like he wants to pull her into him and never let go. His hands are still on her neck and hip and the way he grips her tight where he's holding her makes El sigh against his mouth.

The frenzied edge of their kisses has faded just a bit, but they're still trying to devour each other, like neither of them would mind if they permanently fused together, their bodies pressed together like this forever – chests brushing against each other, one of Mike's knees wedged between El's, her hands in his hair or clutching his arm, his hands on her neck and hip – intertwined and *complete*.

And then the final bell of the day rings, jarring them back to reality,

signaling that, as always, all good things must come to an end.

Mike groans at the sound of the bell, cruel and unyielding, and he so very reluctantly pulls his mouth away from El's, leaning forward to press his forehead against hers, his breath still coming in harsh pants, her own breathing just as harsh.

Slowly, Mike opens his eyes and looks down at her, gasping when he sees her looking back up at him, all wide-eyed and flushed cheeks and her mouth – *sweet Jesus, her mouth, lips red, swollen, glistening, so very tempting, filled with wicked, irresistible promise*. There's nothing Mike wants more than to follow through on the promise of her mouth and now that he knows what it feels like to kiss her, *really* kiss her, he's pretty sure there's nothing he's going to want more for the rest of his life.

But then she smiles at him, soft and fond and awed, and Mike's heart skips what feels like several beats. "Hi," she says, her gaze dancing across his face like she wants to take everything in, memorize everything about this moment.

Mike finds himself smiling back, knowing that he definitely looks like a lovesick fool...but it's ok because he's pretty sure it's a mirror of the same smile that's on El's face right now. "Hi," he says back.

El giggles and Mike feels like he just won the lottery. "So, yeah, *this* happened," El says, still smiling.

"It did. It *definitely* did," Mike says. "I've, uh, been wondering what this would feel like for a while, kissing you."

The flush on El's cheeks deepens and she glances down for a split second, all demure and shy. "Me too," she says when she looks back up, her eyes filled with an emotion that Mike is too scared to name.

But, all the same, he's drawn by the depth of emotion in her gaze and Mike can't help but lean in for another kiss, this one soft and gentle,

tender in a way that has both of them sighing. It's a kiss that says there's more to what's going on between them than simple physical attraction (though that's there, too – *oh god*, is that ever there). It's a kiss that speaks to the promise of *everything*: quiet nights in, soft cuddles in the morning, holding hands while they walk, just *being* together, happy and content.

And, when Mike pulls back a few seconds later, feeling like he can take on the world, he smiles down at her. "Let me take you to dinner."

El gasps, smiling up at him, eyes sparkling with happiness. "Like a date?" she says, the words wrapped around a soft giggle.

Yeah, it's official: Mike's never going to stop smiling. "Yeah, like a date."

"When?"

Mike thinks for a second, knowing El's busy schedule over the next couple of days, and has an answer a moment later. "Sunday. You're done with The Nutcracker then, yeah? Let me take you out then."

But El frowns – more like *pouts* – and she shakes her head. "I can't. I'm leaving for the break right after the last performance on Sunday. And I have the performances tonight and Saturday night. I'm sorry."

Disappointment sinks in Mike's chest like a lodestone, but he gets it, he really does. Still, there's one more thing he's gotta try.... "Well, what about tomorrow before your performances?"

Again, El frowns. "Sorry, I have my weekly brunch tomorrow – moved it from Sunday to tomorrow. And since I skipped it last week...."

Mike lets out a laugh. He can't help it. Her disappointment in not being able to go out on a date with him before she heads home for the holidays is just about the most encouraging thing he's ever experienced. Because, while it sucks that she's booked solid before she goes out of town (and he's not about to ask her to rearrange her life for him), the fact that she wants to go out with him as much as

he wants to go out with her is *everything*. “You and your brunches.”

This time, when El pouts up at him, it’s indignant, almost playful. “Hey, you know how important my brunches are to me.”

Mike does, yes, and he knows it’s mostly because of *who* she meets up with, not the actual act of brunch itself. “Yeah, I know. Still, you *do* know that brunch is just an excuse for day drinking, right?” he teases.

The look that El gives him makes him want to kiss her so bad. So he does. “Hey, I’ll have you know that-” El starts to say before Mike cuts her off, his mouth pressed to hers in a kiss that’s all playful heat and gasping amusement, his hand sliding back into her hair. God, he loves her hair, loves the smooth slide of it between his fingers, the way she reacts when he scrapes his fingernails against her scalp, which he does the very next second. El moans against his lips and Mike can’t help the way he shivers in response. God, he just wants to make her make that noise again and again and again....

They break a few minutes later and Mike’s not even sure he can remember his own name. “What were we talking about?” he asks, feeling a little out of breath.

“You were making fun of me for going out to brunch,” El says, just as out of breath, poking him in the ribcage in a way that makes him squirm, even as he’s laughing.

Mike grins. “Oh, yes, that’s right. I remember now.”

El arches an eyebrow at him, her expression prim and unamused. “It’s not nice, you know, teasing your new girlfriend.”

Mike’s grin widens to shit-eating proportions while his heart feels like it’s about to burst, he’s so happy. “Oh, is that what you are now? My new girlfriend? How very high school of you.”

El smiles, laughing as she reaches up and clasps her hands behind his neck. “Well, we *are* in a high school, so....”

Mike chuckles. “Alright, fair enough. Give the girl a kewpie doll,” he says, reaching in between them to tap the tip of El’s nose with his forefinger.

El scrunches her nose at the touch of Mike's finger and it's so adorable looking, Mike wants to melt. But then she tilts her head up and presses a light kiss to the tip of his finger before he can pull his hand away and Mike's heart gives the weirdest pitter-patter in his chest. El's smiling up at him, looking just as happy as he feels, and it's everything Mike's ever wanted in his life. "So, what are *your* plans, since you feel so confident making fun of mine?"

Mike shrugs, thinking about the plans he has with the Party. "My friends and I are getting together tomorrow afternoon just to hang. I dunno, we'll probably end up playing video games or something."

"Nerds," El says teasingly, grinning.

The stern look Mike gives El is 100% playful and she knows it, if the way she's giggling is any indication. "Hey now, let's just remember who kissed who first, here, yeah? You knew I was a nerd when you decided to lay one on me. In the middle of the hallway in our place of employment, by the way."

El's grin fades into a beautiful smile, all lovey and happy. "Yeah, I know. I love that you're a nerd, though. Some of my favorite people are nerds."

Mike snorts. "Yeah, I'm sure you know a lot of nerds, what with being a beautiful and internationally recognized ballet dancer and all." But, for all his teasing, something in Mike clicks into place with a happy sigh to hear her say that she loves that he's a nerd. It's more than he could have ever hoped for.

"Well, don't forget I'm kind of a nerd, too, yeah?" El says. "So, we have more in common than you make it sound. Besides, you're a successful author, so it's not like I'm the only one here who's collected accolades of any kind, Mr. 'I Have a Movie Deal'."

Mike sighs. "True, true," he says, smiling softly.

There's a long, silent moment, just the two of them enjoying being so close together, still wrapped up in each other. But then El sighs and Mike knows the moment is coming to an end. "I should get going," El says, sounding as reluctant as Mike feels. "I have a performance

tonight at 7 and I need to get to the theater by 4 so I can warm up and get into costume.”

Mike sighs and look down at his watch – it’s 3:25. “Yeah, ok. Let me grab my things and I’ll walk you out to your car.”

El giggles. “What a gentleman. That might even earn you a kiss.”

Mike grins. “A kiss, huh? Gee, wonder what *that’s* li-” Before Mike can finish his sentence, El reaches up and captures his mouth in a kiss so sudden, so *hot - mouths open, teeth almost clashing, tongues flicking out with barely veiled suggestion* - it makes him feel like clearing away the desk El’s perched on, easing her back onto it, and-

Just as suddenly as El initiated the kiss, she ends it, leaving Mike dazed and wanting – though, from the flush on her cheeks and the glimmer in her eye, it seems like she is similarly affected. “Watch that smart mouth of yours,” she says, her voice throaty in a way that has Mike shivering.

“Hey, if *that’s* my punishment for a smart mouth, I don’t know if that’s going to exactly *discourage* me,” Mike says, grinning, feeling bold and flirty. “Besides, you shouldn’t cast judgment until you know what *else* my mouth can do.”

El’s gaze flickers down to his lips, eyes dark and knowing, and she looks back up at him, grinning. “That so, huh? Is that a promise or a threat?”

Mike groans, feeling his skin tighten, his blood heat up. *God, she’s going to kill him.* “A promise. *Definitely* a promise,” he says, brain picturing *exactly* what they’re both talking around and *god* he wishes she didn’t have to go. He sighs, laughing a bit, and leans over so that his forehead is pressed up against hers once more. “You’re a bad influence on me, Hopper.”

“Right back atcha, Wheeler.”

Reluctantly, they finally separate, Mike watching as El gathers her things before they head to his classroom for him to do the same. The halls are empty – everyone cleared out in a hurry now that winter

break is finally here, so there's no one to see Mike and El walking up and down the hall, hands firmly entwined, palms pressed together, all the while looking at each other with soft, giddy smiles.

It's cold outside, the sun about an hour or so from setting as they head outside, and Mike pulls El close to him, not even thinking as he slides his arm across her shoulder. El immediately snuggles up under his embrace, her head nuzzling against his shoulder through his thick coat, and Mike finds himself resenting having to drop her off at her car.

Stay with me, his heart pleads. But she has to go. She has plans and a life that were already there before him. And, despite how deeply he's pretty sure he's fallen in love with her, this thing between them is not even an hour old. It's way too soon to start planning and rearranging their lives around each other.

Doesn't prevent the way that his heart sinks as they get to her car, though. Mike just watches as El tosses her things in the back seat and turns to look at him, looking a little sad, which is about how Mike feels right now. "I wish I didn't have to go," she says.

"Yeah, me neither," Mike says with a sigh. "But you have prior plans, remember?"

"Yeah," El says, echoing the sigh. But then, a second later, she grins, smiling so bright it almost takes Mike's breath away. "Hey, would you like to see me perform tomorrow night? I'm pretty sure I can get you a ticket. And then, after, we can do that celebration dinner we talked about."

Mike grins, elated at the opportunity presented to him. "You mean, our first date?"

El just gives him a look. "No, not our first date. Our first date is going to be something special, Mr. Wheeler, where I have time to prepare and be well-rested, where you'll make a reservation for somewhere nice. Not a causal dinner after a long day of performing. Besides, you promised me a celebration dinner and I asked for a raincheck. I'm just cashing it in."

Mike laughs. “Fair enough,” he says before he sighs. “I would love to come see you perform tomorrow.”

The smile that El gives him makes his heart hurt, it’s so beautiful. “Great! Performance starts at 7, so you should be there by 6:45. I’ll have a ticket left at will-call and I’ll let the stage director know to let you backstage after the show’s over.”

“I can’t wait,” Mike says. “How nicely should I dress?”

El shrugs. “Like you dress to come to work should be fine – we’re not a super fancy ballet company, or anything.”

Mike nods. “I think I can manage that.”

“Good,” El says, mostly breathing the word. “Good.” There’s a bit of a pause before she surges up once more and Mike meets her half way, their lips crashing together almost desperately. Even though they *know* they’re going to see each other tomorrow. It doesn’t matter.

They never want to be apart.

But they have to be, though. Reluctantly, they pull away and El looks up at him, cheeks flushed not just from the cold (though her nose is turning an adorable shade of pink because of it), and she smiles. “Good night, Mike.”

“Night, El,” he says, returning her smile. “Good luck tonight.” He pauses, grinning, as he steps away. “And have fun day drinking tomorrow.”

“It’s brunch!” El says with a long suffering sigh. “You’re *supposed* to day drink!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, if you say so, you lush,” he says as he walks backwards to his car, unable to look away.

El purses her lips and glares at him, but Mike knows it’s all in good fun. “Well, have fun being a giant nerd tomorrow.”

“Hey, you love that I’m a nerd, remember?” Mike calls out.

“And you are *so* lucky I do!” El calls back as she opens the driver’s side door and gets inside. She pauses just before she closes her door and gives him a wave, smiling the entire time.

Mike watches as she starts her car and drives away, leaning against his own vehicle the entire time, wishing he didn’t resent *so much* the plans that she has for this weekend, wishing he weren’t so jealous.

He just wants to spend the entire weekend (*or forever*) with her, is all.

He just never wants to be away from her.

Still, Mike chides himself as he climbs into his car, smiling wryly at the way he’s acting, like a 5 year old who doesn’t want to share his toys. *You’re a grown man. Act like it.* It’s not like he’s just finding out about her plans, either, so he has no reason to be surprised *or* jealous. The Nutcracker performances have been on the calendar for weeks and her regular brunch appointment has been going on since before he got to know her. Nothing to get worked up over. *Especially* because the performances are an obligation. He *maybe* has a case for the brunch – she could have cancelled that if she wanted to, but Mike knows how important it is to her, knows that there’s no reason at all to get jealous.

After all, what kind of guy gets jealous of his girlfriend having brunch with her brother?

Notes for the Chapter:

cackles evilly

Now the fun *really* begins.....

6. One Degree of Separation

Notes for the Chapter:

So, yeah, it's been a while, huh?

I wanted to have this chapter out much, *much* sooner, but my life kind of fell apart for a while there. I was in Germany for a week and I got back to the country pretty much just in time to be with my dad before he passed away. Meanwhile, I've been trying to find a job since my program at work was coming to an end. Thankfully, on the job front, I started a new position at work (seriously, *thank god*, because I have bills to pay), but I've been spending a lot of time with family and processing the loss of my father.

Anyway, it may have taken me a little longer, but I finished this chapter! And it's a *doozy*. One, it's super-ass long (like, 33k long, haha). But, also, this is the chapter that has forced me to up the rating. Nothing explicit, mind you (because I am so not going there)...but, definitely above the T rating. Really, if you've read 'love you like a love song', this is on par with that.

Also, what you're about to read, in light of the final sentence from the last chapter.....I'm not gonna lie, this is probably a little contrived at the very least. Yes, I'm aware that it's very silly. But I'm having fun with it and that's what matters.

So, anyway...enjoy?

(Before I go, tho, quick shout out to my lovely beta, FourthHorse/@linachupi. You're a doll, babe, and ILY.)

Somewhere, *somewhat*, Mike Wheeler must have made a deal with the

devil in exchange for the most talented, magical mouth ever possessed by a man.

Because it's been over 6 hours since they kissed and El's lips are *still tingling*. It's like she's been branded, seared with sinful promise and burning passion, and it's left her addicted, craving *more*.

El's carried the sensation, the *memory* of it all evening – not just of his mouth, hot against hers, soft lips and silken tongue, devouring and entreating all at the same time – but of *everything*.

(*mike's hands in her hair, fingers weaving and tugging on the strands; the firebrand of his palm, trailing down her back, thumb grazing her side through the thin fabric of her blouse; his hips pinning her to her desk, pressed flush against her stomach, the lines of his body hard against hers; the low, decadent rumble of his moans, reverberating against her mouth, sending subsonic shivers rippling through every atom.*)

Yeah, El's been a gooey, lovesick, *distracted* mess all evening...and it's 100% Mike Wheeler's fault.

To be fair. You did kiss him first, her brain oh so helpfully points out. And while, yes, that might be exactly what happened, it doesn't excuse the fact that Mike's mouth – *oh god, his mouth* – is just too talented for its own good in a way that makes El wonder *what else it can do* and the thought threatens to short-circuit her entire brain.

It's a wonder El makes it through Friday night's performance when, at best, only half of her mind is focused on what she needs to be doing. Somehow, though, El manages not to fall on her face, a fact she can only attribute to years of practice *and* Robert's steady presence out on stage.

"Hey, you ok?" he asks once the show's over for the night and they're heading towards the dressing rooms. Faintly, El can still hear the din of the crowd as they get up from their seats and exit the theater, but it fades easily into the background.

Which allows her to focus on how she cringes with embarrassment, instead. "That bad, huh?" she says, a wincing smile crossing her face.

Robert raises an eyebrow, the top of the arch attempting to merge with the dark hair at the edge of his hairline. “I mean, I don’t think anyone in the audience noticed. But I’ve been dancing with you 3-4 days a week for two months now. You’re off your rhythm, Hopper.”

A deep flush creeps up El’s cheeks and she sighs. “God, I’m so embarrassed. Robert, I’m so sorry,” El says, turning so she can place a hand on his arm, trying to convey her apology with her touch.

Robert shrugs. “Like I said, I highly doubted that anyone noticed. And we got through it just fine – besides, I almost dropped you last weekend, remember?” He grins, teasing, before the expression sobers, his smile growing gentle. “Everything is ok, though, yeah? I know you’re new to the city and, even though I know there’s a few people you know here, I like to think that we’re friends. So, if there’s ever anything you want to talk about, I’m here.”

El smiles, gratitude settling over her like warm honey. “Thanks, Robert. And yeah, everything’s fine. I’m just....” El trails off as she thinks, again, about *why* she’s distracted. And she can feel the way her smile morphs, turning dreamy and lovesick.

And then Robert laughs, a low, knowing chuckle. “Ah, I see what’s going on. Only a woman in love smiles like that. So, who’s the lucky guy?”

They’re standing near the dressing rooms now and El pauses in front of the door to the room she shares with the girl who’s playing Clara. All around them, other dancers are milling about, getting ready so they can go home. But El barely notices them as she faces Robert. “He’s, uh, someone I work with. A teacher – a science teacher, actually. He’s....” Again, El trails off as she thinks about Mike and her heart feels like it could just explode in her chest as it swells with happiness and excitement and *love*. “He’s amazing. Smart and funny and so sweet and, *oh my god*, just the most *amazing* kisser.”

Robert’s smile only widens. “Aww, that’s amazing, El. I’m happy for you.”

El giggles and looks down, still a little embarrassed and overwhelmed about everything. “So, yeah, it’s, um, still really new – why I was

distracted.”

“Hey, look, I get it,” Robert says, reaching out to give El a comforting tap on the shoulder. “Just...try to get your head back in the game for tomorrow.”

At that, El smiles, feeling like she’s grinning from ear to ear. “He’s coming tomorrow, actually. To see me perform. I told the house manager to let him backstage after the show.”

“Oh, hey, I’d love to meet him,” Robert says. “See if he measures up to what I think you deserve. Maybe even put the fear of god into him if he ever hurts you.”

El snickers. “He has, like, half a foot on you, Robert.”

Robert laughs. “That just means his center of gravity is up higher – easier to knock over.” He winks at her, clearly just teasing. “Well, I’m going to get out of costume and head home. Sandy’s been by herself all night with a sick pup and she’s probably ready to let me handle dog puke for a while.”

El grins at the mention of Robert’s wife before she shakes her head in sympathy. “Poor woman, what a saint she is for putting up with you. Go home to your wife, Robert. And tell her I say hello.”

“Will do,” Robert says with a jaunty salute before he turns to walk to his own dressing room. “See you tomorrow!”

“Bye!” El calls back before she heads into the dressing room. The girl who plays Clara – Jessie – is in there, talking to someone on her phone on speaker as she changes and El tunes out the sound as she goes about getting out costume, her own thoughts returning to Mike and the gooey, fluttery feeling memories of kissing him spark inside of her. She can’t stop smiling and it’s like El just floats through the routine of changing and heading home for the night.

It’s not long until El is safely home and she sighs in relief, leaning against the inside of her front door. For all her giddy excitement about finally, *finally* kissing Mike, she’s exhausted. It’s been a long day, a long week – a long *month* – and she’s ready to crawl into bed.

Just a couple more days of performing and then it'll calm down. Then I can breathe again, El thinks as she pushes herself away from the door and heads upstairs to her bedroom, duffle bag dropped by the front door to be left there until morning.

It's nearly 10:30 by the time El's finished showering and getting ready for bed and, as she crawls under the covers, she's overcome with the desire, the *need* to talk to Mike. So, with all the lights of the house turned off except for the soft, warm light of her nightstand, El situates herself under her thick, down comforter and goes to call Mike.

They've only talked on the phone a handful of times – they mostly text instead of call – but when Mike answers the phone a couple of rings later, El resolves to amend that. Because the way he greets her – “El, hi.” – is with a voice that is low and raspy and so tender, it makes her want to *live* in that sound and El finds herself sighing wistfully.

“Hi, sorry,” she says. “I didn’t wake you, did I? I know it’s late, but....”

Mike lets out a low laugh, setting off shivers that El feels all the way down to her toes. “No, I’m just staring at my laptop screen while the blinking cursor mocks me. What’s up? Why are you calling? I mean, I’m not *complaining*, just curious.”

El sighs again. “Just wanted to hear your voice,” she says, blushing but so happy she has the ability, the opportunity to say things like this now. “I need to go to bed soon, but I just...can’t stop thinking about earlier.”

There’s no need to clarify *what* and El knows it when Mike echoes her sigh, sounding just as happy as she feels. “Me neither,” Mike says, his words just above a whisper. El wishes he was here in person to whisper those words directly in her ear, instead of a mile away in his own home, saying the words through a phone call. *Soon*, her brain whispers and El flushes, squirming a bit at the thought of having Mike in bed with her. “It was – *is* – the most amazing thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Me too,” El says. “God, I can’t wait to see you tomorrow.” She smiles, breathing picking up with excitement. “Hey, I got your ticket held aside at Will Call, so all you have to do is give them your name.”

“Sounds good,” Mike says. “I’m looking forward to it. Even if it is the ballet and my friends would never let me live it down if they knew I was going.”

“Boys suck,” El says sagely. “You don’t, though.”

Mike chuckles. “Who said I don’t? Context is key, El.”

The hint of innuendo in Mike’s voice is tempered by the amusement that radiates through the line and El finds herself giggling. She opens her mouth to tease back – *So, when do you suck?* – but her phone buzzes with an incoming text message.

El pulls the phone away and glances at the screen, rolling her eyes at the one word text message: *janie*.

“Ah, so you *do* suck sometimes,” El says, getting back to her conversation with Mike, her voice pitching with breathy flirtatiousness while her heart flutters in her chest. “When? And, pray tell, *what*? ”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll find out,” Mike says. The hint of breathlessness beneath his words sends a frisson of desire skittering down her spine.

El sucks in a deep breath and tries to calm the rapid beat of her heart. “Hmm, I’m not a patient person, Mike,” El says. “I have needs. And I *need* to know.”

Her phone buzzes again. Another text message. *jaaaaanie*.

“Oh, you have needs, huh? Good to know,” Mike says and El can just *hear* the shit-eating grin that she knows is stretching up those beautiful, glorious lips.

But, before she can even think of a response, El’s phone buzzes a third time. But this time it’s with an incoming call and, frustration of being interrupted hitting its peak, El lets out a harsh sigh. “Ugh, hold on, I’m being bothered with another call. Just...hang on.” El taps her

screen to answer the call and put Mike on hold before she presses the phone back against her ear. “What?” she all but barks.

“Janie! You answered!”

El rolls her eyes at the sound of her step-brother’s voice and she groans. “William Edward Byers, do you know what time it is?”

“Time for me to have another drink,” Will says and El can hear it now, the mild slurring in his voice. *Great, he's drunk.* And, in the background, there’s the sounds of a party – *probably an art gallery thing of some kind.* “And, my middle name isn’t ‘Edward’. I don’t even have a middle name.”

El can’t help but laugh a bit. “Yeah, but scolding you doesn’t have the same effect without it.” It’s one the things she does with him, something she started back when their parents had just gotten married and they found themselves living in the same house. “So, whatcha want, Billy?”

Will makes a noise that’s a vocalization of the pout she just knows is on his face. “Don’t call me ‘Billy’.”

“I’ll stop when you stop calling me ‘Janie’.”

Will lets out a petulant sigh. “So, that’ll be *never.*”

“Exactly.” It’s an old argument, a familiar well-worn pattern that drapes over El like an old sweater. El grins, almost despite herself. She doesn’t *really* hate the nickname “Janie”, especially with the fondness in Will’s voice when he says it. And she knows he feels the same about her calling him “Billy” – just a stupid thing that started when they were teenagers adjusting to living together that became something cherished, *especially* the silly argument they have about it if it’s been a while since they last talked. “Anyway...” El says, prompting Will to continue.

“Oh, right! Just wanted to let you know that it’s going to be just you and me tomorrow for brunch. Greg has a...something that I can’t remember right now, but it sounded very important when he told me,” Will says.

El giggles, feeling her frustration fading a bit. “Dear, sweet Billiam. Honey, go home, you’re drunk. Also, you *do* know you could have just let me know tomorrow Greg wasn’t joining us, right?”

“I know, but I had the thought and, well-”

“Drunk you is an impulse caller,” El says, finishing the sentence for Will. “Well, thanks for letting me know. I’m gonna go now and I’ll see you tomorrow-”

“No, wait! What’s the hurry? I haven’t talked to you in *days*,” Will says. “You’ve been so busy with...*everything* that you haven’t had time for your favorite step-brother.”

El grins. “Huh, that’s funny. Because I just talked to Jon a couple of days ago.”

Will gasps. “Low blow, Janie,” he says, sounding like her words were an actual, physical blow. “That just hurts. Well, you’re no longer my favorite step-sister.”

El laughs. “I’m your *only* step-sister, you goofus.”

“Eh, details,” Will says dismissively before he sighs like the drama queen he is when he’s drunk. “But, *fine*, I’ll let you go. See you bright and early tomorrow, yeah?”

“Yep, bright and early. G’night.”

“Night, Janie.”

El hurries to switch back over to Mike. “Hey, you still there?” she asks, feeling a little breathless as the words rush from her lips.

There’s a clacking sound and, a second later, Mike’s voice comes through the line. “Yeah, just, one sec....” After a couple of moments, the clacking stops and then Mike speaks again. “Sorry, while I was waiting for you to come back, I got inspired and wrote a few sentences. But, I’m back now. Who was calling you?”

El lets out a groaning laugh. “Just my brother, updating me about brunch tomorrow. Like he couldn’t just *tell* me in the morning. But,

no, he has to call me while he's drunk. Go figure."

"He sounds interesting," Mike says, breathing out a laugh. "This is... Bill? Billy?"

El smiles at the nickname – *ha, it's spreading. Good.* "Yep, that's the one."

"And you have another brother, right? JB?"

This pulls a giggle out of El, which is what happens every time she hears Jon's nickname – given to him by his college friends that El grabbed onto with both hands after hearing it once and hasn't let go since, mostly because of the adorable way Jon blushes and gets a little annoyed whenever she says it. "Yeah, he's in New York, though. I lived with him when I was dancing professionally. God, I think I've only mentioned him a couple of times and you remembered his name. I'm impressed."

"Yeah, well, I just want to know everything about you. So, naturally, I hoard each new piece of knowledge you give me." Mike pauses, laughing. "Billy and JB. God, your brothers sounds like a couple of rednecks."

"Hey, now," El says through a laugh of her own. "Only I get to make fun of my brothers. And I'll have you know that a) those are my nicknames for them, and b) they are two, very cultured, classy men."

"Except when one of them drunk calls you late on a Friday night."

"Point, but not set or match, Wheeler," El says. "And, technically they're—" The words *my step-brothers* get swallowed by the sudden yawn that swells up from deep in her lungs, taking over her whole body.

Mike laughs again, but it's gentle, soft. "Hey, you sound exhausted. Sounds like it's bedtime for you. We can pick this up in the morning."

El nods. Yes, she is exhausted and she can feel it in the way her body starts to slump in bed, her eyelids growing heavy. "Ok, sounds good. G'night, Mike. Sweet dreams."

“They’ll have you in them, so how could they be anything but?” Mike says and El feels her heart skip and flutter in her chest despite her exhaustion. “Night, El. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Hmm, can’t wait.”

And as El hangs up the phone and turns off the light before snuggling into bed, she does so with a soft smile on her face, filled with hopeful excitement, and absolutely unable to *wait* for tomorrow.

The first time Will Byers meets El Hopper is 5th period English in their freshman year of high school.

It’s the first day of school and the air buzzes with heightened energy – excitement from the seniors that this is the first day of their last year of high school, nervous anxiety from the freshman with the fear of the unknown, and all-around anguished mourning of the end of summer vacation from just about everybody.

But, despite all that energy, Will feels removed from it all – along with the rest of the Party, really. Because, for the first time since Dustin joined the Party back in 4th grade, there is no Paladin to brave the school halls with the rest of them. Worse, this is Will’s *first*, first day of school without Mike, *period*.

So, on top of having to get used to an entirely new routine and going back to the bottom of the totem pole again (at least, back in 8th grade, even though the Party was just a bunch of loser nerds, they were still “upperclassmen” and now they don’t even have *that*), Will, never mind the Party as a whole, has to do it all without his best friend by his side. It feels like a chair that’s suddenly missing a leg – it still stands upright, able to balance ok on the three legs that remain, but it’s wobbly, unstable, *precarious*.

When El Hopper walks into English class, it takes Will a moment to notice her – mostly because he’s still sad and caught up in his own thoughts – but he *does* notice her because she’s the only new thing in

a town that never changes, a town that history normally takes one look at and goes “nah, I’ll pass.”

(Though, to be fair, *a lot* happened in the last half of summer – a relative few short weeks, all things considered, from the snippets of the rumor mill Will’s overheard when he helps his mom out at Melvald’s. First, Ted Wheeler gets a promotion up to corporate headquarters in Indianapolis, uprooting the entire family and resettling them more than 2 hours away, and, suddenly, one of the foundational pillars of Hawkins’ social community is gone.

But *then*, a couple of weeks later, Jim Hopper comes strolling back into town, a prodigal son’s return, of sorts, with a beautiful teenage daughter in tow. There are whispers of a dysfunctional marriage, a mother who’s “gone crazy”, and a traumatized, fragile girl who copes by dancing for hours on end while her father takes over as Chief of Police from ol’ Chief Johnson, who retired a few months back, to help pay for her “private lessons”.)

Will’s heard the whispers around school today about the hot new girl with a cop for a dad – *Man, that’s just cruel. – Fucking cop bait, that is. – You just try and feel her up and you’ll find your ass in the slammer.* – but this is his first time getting a good look at her and Will has to admit that he’s kind of curious, as these things go.

El Hopper is pretty, Will has to give her that, pretty in an objective sense of the word, the kind of pretty that grows up into words like “beautiful” or “stunning”. She’s thin compared to most girls, but not starkly so...or, at least, the thin sweater and jeans she’s wearing do a good job of hiding it. There’s a carefully crafted, neutral mask on her face that makes her look aloof, the kind of mask that has Will wondering what might be hiding beneath it. He looks away when her gaze slides over him as she searches for where to sit, but, still, he watches out of the corner of his eye as she finds a seat, sitting down one seat up and over from his.

Her backpack slides off her shoulders as she sits down and Will can’t help but notice the way she carries herself – impeccable posture, comfortably stiff, like she’s used to holding herself this way all the time, with shoulders back, head held high, arms loose at her side. She leans over to get her things out of her backpack, a notebook and a

pencil, but the pencil catches on the zipper and drops from her grip, rolling to land by Will's toes.

She turns to watch just as Will leans over to grab it. "Here, I got it," he says, voice shaking a bit – talking to people who look like they're more popular than he is always makes him nervous. But he sits up to hand the pencil over and manages to keep from trembling.

Surprisingly, the smile that crosses El's face is kind, without guile, *real*. "Thanks," she says.

"No problem," Will says. And El turns back to her things, neither of saying anything more, not even to introduce themselves.

For a couple of weeks, that's pretty much the only interaction Will has with El. He watches her, though – hard not to, really. She settles in almost automatically with some of the more popular girls; not the *most* popular girls, like Stacey and Jennifer, but the girls who occupy the social tier right beneath them, like Megan Shaughnessy and Katie Halsey. But, even at a distance, Will can tell that El is still a little apart from everyone, still a little too much an outsider, still with the mystique of the exotic surrounding her. It gets him wondering what she's really like, what the world outside of Hawkins contains, if it's better than *here*.

He gets his chance to find out, though. Because, a couple of weeks into the new school year, Will's mom drags him and Jonathan over to Jim Hopper's house for dinner.

Apparently, Jim Hopper and Joyce Byers (nee Horowitz) go way back. Like, "they dated in high school" back. Or, at least, Will's pretty sure from the awkward way the two adults look at each other when his mom introduces Will and Jonathan.

But then Jim Hopper goes to introduce El to Will and Jonathan, and El smiles. "Will and I already met at school, Dad," she says, her voice quiet, but clear.

Jim Hopper smiles, eyes crinkling and teeth flashing white as a broad smile cuts through his beard. "Oh, yeah?" he says, looking over at Will.

Will, for his part, is shocked that a girl who is so much more popular seems to remember him (bullies are one thing, but the really popular kids *never* acknowledge his existence). But he finds his voice quickly under the expectant look the new police chief is giving him. “Uh, yeah. We have 5th period English together, sir.”

“Well, that’s great!” Jim Hopper looks over at El, a teasing glint in his eye. “And you said you wouldn’t make any friends here in Hawkins.”

El rolls her eyes, the expression animating her, making her look *normal*, not nearly so popular-girl-threatening. “Dad,” she whines. “I never said *that*. I said making friends was *different* here.”

Hopper holds up his hands in a placating gesture. “Alright, alright, sorry, my mistake.” He turns back to Will. “Oh, and kid? Enough with the ‘sir’ crap. Just call me Hop, yeah?”

Will sucks in a sharp breath, panic at being called out like that, but he calms when he realizes what the ask is. “Yeah, ok,” Will says, knowing it sounds manageable (but also knowing he’s gonna slip up a few times because Chief Hopper is a Very Big Man with a loud booming voice and an air of “don’t fuck with me” that makes Will a little nervous).

Dinner is good. The Hopper household, which is just down the street, is nice – nicer than the Byers’ at any rate, though that’s not hard to achieve – and Jim Hopper makes a pretty mean lasagna. He and Will’s mom share a couple of beers while the kids drink milk (in Will’s case) or water (Jonathan and El’s). And, over dinner, while Hop and Will’s mom catch up on old times, Will and Jonathan learn about El, Jonathan mostly listening as Will and El talk.

At first, it’s strange. Jonathan is the one who gets them talking, asking El how she’s settling in, how she likes Hawkins so far, what was her old school like.

El dutifully answers and there’s no way Will can miss the sad longing in her voice as she talks about her old school. His heart goes out to her almost on reflex. It’s just that it must *suck* having to get used to a whole new school with all new people and he can’t help but think about how Mike is handling this very thing. Will knows he’s planning

on talking to Mike during the weekend when they'll meet up online to play EverQuest together – their replacement for D&D. But now Will wants to go call Mike just to check on him, to see how he's doing.

It's this thought running through his head that almost makes him miss El trying to get his attention and it takes Jonathan kicking him under the table to pull Will back to the present. "Uh, yeah, El? Sorry, got lost in my own head."

El giggles and it sounds more amused than mocking. "That's ok. I just wanted to ask you what everyone does for fun around here. We've only been in town for a month and, well, I haven't had a lot of time to figure it out."

Will blushes, embarrassed. "Oh, well, uh," he stumbles, looking down at his plate. "Um, me and my friends usually just hang out and play video games or something, maybe watch movies. I, uh, don't know what the more popular kids do, though, so I don't really know what's cool."

"Oh, video games are cool," El says in a way that has Will looking back up. There's a grin on El's face that looks too giddy to be fake and Will finds himself relaxing. "Back home, my friend Max and I would play video games whenever I had time to hang out – though it was mostly me watching her play. I've never had too much time to play, but watching her is fun."

"Never had too much time?" Jonathan asks, echoing El's words.

"Yeah, most of my free time is spent practicing ballet," El says.

"Wow, you must be really good, then," Jonathan says.

Will watches as El's cheeks redden and she turns bashful, trying to shake off the praise. "Oh, no, I still have a lot to learn. But I'm going to learn it all. I want to be a professional ballerina."

"Wow, that's cool," Will says. "I hope you make it."

El looks over at Will and she smiles. "Thanks, Will. I hope I do, too."

The conversation relaxes from that point on, flowing naturally and Will finds that El is cool to talk to. She's nice and funny, not snobby or mean or any of the other things he normally associates with popular girls. And, when the night's over and Will goes home, he thinks he may have made a new friend.

El and Will are friendly whenever they see each other in the halls of Hawkins High, sharing small smiles despite their very different friend groups, pairing up to study for English tests and work on class projects. And, as their parents' dinners become more and more of a regular thing, they chat for what feels like hours on end about nothing in particular – the gossip around school, what new movies are coming out, commiserating over tests and homework.

Will doesn't tell the rest of the Party much about El. Dustin thinks that El being nice is a long con of a trap, Lucas just tells him to be careful, and Mike says nothing because he's not there to see any of it and he barely knows about it. It comes up exactly once on a Skype call with Mike – the rest of the Party hanging in Dustin's room while Mike sits in his new bedroom in Indianapolis – when Will has to duck out early so he can meet up for the regular Hopper-Byers dinner.

"Don't let the princess fool you," Dustin says as Will gathers his things. "She's like a shark waiting for any hint of blood in the water."

Will rolls his eyes in the middle of shucking on his jacket. "Dustin, she's not that bad. She's actually pretty nice."

"Wait, who is this?" Mike asks, his voice tinny and muffled over the speakers, his brow furrowed with a very Mike Wheeler combination of concern and confusion.

Will sighs and just shakes his head. "No one, just the daughter of one of my mom's old friends. Our parents have us do family dinners every other week and Dustin thinks she's waiting for an opportunity to embarrass me in public or something."

"Dude, popular girls are *always* waiting for an opportunity to make fun of nerds," Dustin says. "Just be on your guard, is all I'm saying."

"Yeah, whatever Dustin," is all Will says before he waves at Mike.

“Bye, Mike. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye, Will. Have fun at dinner and don’t get eaten alive by popular girls, ok?” Mike says, a teasing grin on his face.

As Will leaves, he hears the others talking about the new Blade movie that’s about to come out in theaters and all the concern that the others have about Will when it comes to El is completely and utterly forgotten.

For several months, this is the only time El is mentioned in Mike’s company and she’s not even *named*. Of course, this changes...*kind of*.

It takes Will a few months, solidly into spring of his freshman year, to notice that something is going on between his mom and Hop and he has it confirmed by both of them at one of their regular dinners a month later towards the end of May.

The conversation is a little awkward – really, no kid likes to hear that their parent is dating – but no one gets angry about it and the Hopper-Byers’ kids are, overall, pretty supportive. Will, for his part, is mostly happy for his mom as long as he doesn’t have to think too much about his mom dating (because, *ew*) and he’s relieved that El seems to be equally ok with it, from the way she smiles softly, even though it’s a little sad. Will’s relieved because he knows if El wasn’t ok with their parents dating that Hop would be torn between Will’s mom and El and, in the end, Hop would *always* pick El. But Hop also makes Will’s mom so happy that he would hate to see something ruin it.

But nothing seems to ruin it and, suddenly, it’s the summer between freshman and sophomore year of high school. Jonathan is preparing to head off to NYU in the fall and Mike comes out to visit for a couple of weeks, rotating between everyone’s houses. The Hopper-Byers dinners are still going strong, but they’re down to 4 as El is gone pretty much the entire summer at ballet camp up in Michigan, leaving a few days after the end of the school year and only coming

back a couple of weeks before school picks back up.

The first dinner El's back for is one of the seminal moments of Will's life. Because it's the dinner where Hop and his mom announce that they're getting married...and that the families are going to be moving in together over the course of the next month.

So, by the time Will starts his sophomore year of high school, he's half living out of two houses and watching his mom plan a small wedding – though, in the end, Hop and Joyce get fed up with all the details and just get married with a small, family-only ceremony the weekend of Thanksgiving when Jonathan comes home for the short break – and Will finds himself suddenly living with a *girl* who's not his mom.

It's a weird transition. El's a lot more girly than his mom and Will finds himself torn between incredulity at all the things that take up a significant portion of the counter in the bathroom and sheer frustration at having to share a bathroom with a girl who *takes forever getting ready in the morning*. Never mind the different tastes in music or the debate over which breakfast cereal to buy or the squabbles over what to watch on TV.

(And don't get Will started on the mess El leaves in the bathroom when she tapes up her feet after ballet practice – bloody bandages and used cotton swabs and dirty tissues and *ugh* it's so fucking gross. God, just the sight of her feet – bleeding, crooked toes, cracked skin, swollen joints – never fail to give him the heebie jeebies, though Dustin ends up being Endlessly Fascinated and Gleefully Grossed Out by El's feet.)

It's this new co-habitation that sets El on the path to becoming an adjacent member of the Party – not really part of it, but existing alongside of it – because, once Will and his mom move into Hop's house, Dustin and Lucas start coming over when they hang out with Will after school and they slowly start to get to know El. It takes Dustin and Lucas a little while to get over their inherent distrust of the girl who roams in circles that are so much loftier than the ones they have access to, but El wins them over by being genuine and nice and kind of nerdy, herself.

It's also this new co-habitation that starts the beginning of "Janie".

It's day 2 of the Byers living with the Hoppers. Dustin and Lucas are over at the Hopper household to help Will set up his new room and the three of them are in the kitchen eating a snack when the phone rings.

The three boys freeze, looking at each other – Dustin and Lucas with expectant looks, Will like the phone is an object that'll burn him if he touches it. "I'm not answering it," Will says. "Let the machine get it."

And so, the answering machine, parked on a small table between the kitchen and dining room, picks up. Hop's voice comes through first – "We're not in to answer the phone right now, please leave a message." – and then a second voice comes through after the beep. It's a woman's and it's not Hop she's calling for. It's El.

"Janie, dear, it's your mother calling...." the voice says, full of the kind of simpering mothering and doting babying that makes Dustin chortle under his breath like the stupid 15 year old boy he is, his amusement soon spreading to Lucas and Will. The message continues on, something about a recital and how precious "Janie" looked in her little tutu, and, by the end, the boys are giggling mostly out of second-hand embarrassment, but also because El does not strike them as the kind of girl with a cutsie nickname (she's normally Much Too Serious for that).

But what solidifies it as the name the Party uses for her is her reaction when Dustin first uses it later that afternoon.

El's just gotten home from dance practice and she's walking to her room, passing by Will's open door, when Dustin calls out. "Hi Janie! Have a good practice?" It's obvious he's glad for some sort of defensive weapon to use against a popular girl, because he's smiling ear-to-ear with the biggest shit-eating grin Will's ever seen.

There's a beat before El backtracks to stand in Will's open doorway. "Where did you hear that name?" she asks, *demanding*, the look on her face pouty, lips pursed, cheeks flushed, eyes narrowed.

"Gosh, I don't know what you're talking about, Janie," Dustin says,

his tone causing Lucas to let out a low chortling laugh. Even Will's not immune from the amusement – El is as adorable and threatening as an angry kitten when she's annoyed.

"Your mom called," Will says. "Left you a message."

El's face screws up in a grimace that's partly made of annoyance and partly frustration and she heaves a sigh. "Don't call me 'Janie,'" she says, her tone taking on a whine before she disappears from view and into her room.

But, of course, that doesn't stop first Dustin and then Lucas and Will from using the nickname. And it's not long before "El" becomes "Janie". Will likes the sound of the nickname: the sing-song quality, the way it rolls from his tongue, and later, the way it sounds when he uses it as a term of endearment, full of soft sentiment. But he *also* loves the way El rolls her eyes and the way she heaves a sigh when he uses it (though, by the time they've grown up, it's mostly an act... *mostly*).

Of course, El eventually retaliates with her own nicknames – Billy, Dusty, and Lukey – all said in a saccharine, simpering tone that gets on their nerves (though, in the end, these also go from teasing to endearing).

It's "Janie" that gets passed on to Mike when he finally gets a name to place with the few stories he's heard about this popular girl that Will hangs out with every once in a while, the one Dustin refers to as "Princess". Will, Lucas, and Dustin are in Will's room; it's his first weekend at the Hopper household and they're having their weekly Skype call with Mike, the four of them laughing and talking and being raucous teenage boys...only it's just past midnight and the rest of the house is sleeping.

Dustin's in the middle of regaling Mike with the funny happenings from Hawkins High while the rest of them laugh at Dustin's penchant for the dramatic. "...and then, Bruce Green just stands up in the middle of the cafeteria, and..."

The door bursts open and the three boys in Will's room all look past Will's laptop screen to see El, standing there with her hands on her

hips. Her hair's up in a messy ponytail and she's wearing thin PJs that emphasize the slender musculature of her arms and legs. "Hey, do you guys *mind*? I'm trying to sleep next door. I have an early day tomorrow."

Dustin, Lucas, and Will just look at each other, barely chastised, while Will notices Mike looking at *them* through the screen with a curious eyebrow raised, and it's Will who speaks up to apologize. "Sorry, Janie. We'll be quiet."

The use of the nickname (still teasing, not fond - not *yet*) triggers another one of El's adorable glares and she huffs a sigh. "Ugh, *boys*," she groans before she turns and slams Will's door shut, leaving the three boys practically rolling on the bed with laughter.

"Guys, guys, c'mon," Will says as he tries to get his own laughter under control. "We should really try to be quiet."

"Was that your future step-sister? She sounds...kind of snooty," Mike says, his own face torn between amusement and longing – Will knows how much Mike hates missing out on all of this, on actually *being* here. The rest of them try to downplay stuff, to make Mike feel not so bad, but Will can still tell that it hurts Mike, the distance between them all.

(Will can't *wait* for college, when all of them will end up back in the same place, like they were always meant to be.)

(Will also wonders what it would be like if Mike *were* here, how Mike and El would get along. *Well, I'm sure I'll find out sooner rather than later*, Will thinks.)

"Yeah, that was her. And she's not snooty, not really. We *are* being loud and she does have to get up early tomorrow. Some conditioning thing, I don't know exactly," Will says.

"Yeah, she's not so bad, I guess," Lucas says. "For a popular girl, anyway. She actually likes Star Wars and video games, which is more than I can say for Stacey's little clique."

"Still, it's weird that Will's living with a *girl*," Dustin teases.

Mike grins, all knowing. “Does she leave all her gross stuff all over the counter? I *hated* when Nancy did that.”

Will groans and rolls his eyes – *yes, someone who understands!* “God, it’s *so annoying!* Her stuff is *everywhere!* Like, why do girls need so many things? My *mom* doesn’t need all that stuff.”

Mike nods sagely, commiserating from his own shared experience. “Yeah, I know. I’m so glad Nancy’s off at college. I actually have room for my things in the bathroom, now. *And* there’s even hot water left for me when I shower. It’s great.”

The conversation moves on after that – all things considered, there *are* better things to talk about besides the fact that Will’s future step-sister is a girly girl. Janie becomes just a part of the periphery of Will’s life whenever Mike and the rest of the Party talk, mostly because, one, there are more important things to talk about when they all crowd around a computer to video chat, things like video games and movies and comic books and general teenage nerd angst.

And, two, well...there’s the fact that El Hopper is *busy*, spending most of her time after school and on the weekends dancing. She joins dance club and the small ballet studio in downtown Hawkins, but her weekends and a couple of days after school are spent trucking back to just outside Indianapolis for dance clinics and extra lessons. And then there’s the dance camps and workshops and, really, it sometimes feels like Will doesn’t even *have* a step-sister for how much he doesn’t see her.

It gets to the point that even *Mike* mentions it. “Am I ever going to meet Janie? She’s, like, *never* around,” Mike says during spring break their junior year of high school. Mike is visiting from Indianapolis and Mike and Will are currently just hanging out in Will’s room, flipping through comic books and eating junk food.

Will lets out a wry, chortling laugh. “You think you’d have met her *already*,” he says, a little incredulous, but also not surprised. El’s always busy with ballet and this is no exception, as she’s off at a week-long ballet intensive workshop thing to help her prepare an audition piece for the ABT (Will has no doubt she’s going to get in – he saw her perform last winter in *The Nutcracker* and she was

amazing). “I don’t know, she’s really busy all the time with dance stuff.”

Mike grins. “Likely story. Or, there’s *another* reason and you’re just purposefully hiding her from me. What is it, Byers, afraid that your sister is going to fall madly in love with me?”

Even though Will knows Mike is joking, he still rolls his eyes and gives Mike a look. “Please, Wheeler. She’s so far out of your league she might as well be in a different galaxy.” He pauses, thinking about the idea of Mike and El together, and finds it Not At All Horrible If Very Unlikely. “Still, you’d be better than her current boyfriend, that’s for sure, so if anything, I should be *dying* to introduce you two.”

Not that Will honestly thinks anything would ever happen between Mike and El (if they ever meet, that is), but the overall point still stands. Will cares about El, has even come to care about her like a sibling should, and he worries about her. And what he worries about the most is her *horrendous* taste in boys. Her first boyfriend in sophomore year cheated on her. Her second boyfriend went around bragging to everyone about how he “totally nailed the Chief’s daughter” despite the fact that he *hadn’t*. And El’s current boyfriend is just a selfish, self-absorbed, neglectful asshole who can never remember any of El’s favorite things or when they’re supposed to go on a date or *anything*.

Yeah, El Hopper has *the worst* taste in boys *ever* and Will fears for her future romantic happiness.

But, as El repeatedly tells him whenever it happens to come up, it’s really none of Will’s business. And it isn’t, if Will’s being honest with himself.

Still, he’s never going to stop worrying. Because, at the end of the day, even if it’s only through marriage, El Hopper is Will Byers’ sister. And *that’s* what matters.

Of course, just because Will loves El and cares about her, doesn't mean that building and maintaining their relationship is easy.

Throughout high school, the both of them are busy, *really* busy. If they're not in school, they're busy doing schoolwork and if they're not doing *that*, then both of them are caught up in their individual arts – El with ballet and Will with painting and drawing. And, despite the very deep conversations they can so easily fall into – like the ones where El talks about her fears of failure or ending up like her mom and where Will eventually screws up the courage to come out to her – those conversations are far and few between. It feels like it's never *quite* their time, like they're just never settled enough or have enough free time to devote to just spending time together.

So, while Will loves El, he sometimes feels like there's still a lot about her he needs to learn.

And this only gets worse once they graduate high school.

Will gets into the Art Institute in Chicago, while the rest of the Party gets into Northwestern, and El earns a spot with the ABT, moving in with Jonathan in New York. Suddenly, Will and El go from seeing each other on an almost daily basis, even if only in passing, to seeing each other only a few times a year during the holidays.

At first, they try and fill the void with weekly phone calls. But, as the pressures of keeping up with school and performing build, those weekly calls become bi-weekly, then monthly, then once every few months until, with the exception of seeing each other during the holidays, Will and El's only interaction is really on social media once El gets an Instagram account (really, she's as bad as Mike when it comes to Facebook, so Will doesn't even bother trying there).

In some ways, as they age, El becomes nothing more than a polite acquaintance – while he knew her fairly well as a teenager, Will feels like he barely knows her as an adult.

It doesn't stop him from quietly tracking her career though as she rises through the ranks of the ABT to become a principle dancer, following her progress towards her bachelor's degree at Columbia

from his mom during their weekly talks, and making snarky, yet concerned comments on her Instagram posts. At least this and seeing her a few times a year is better than nothing, all things considered.

And the rest of the Party isn't any better. Lucas has an Instagram account, but doesn't really use it and he occasionally runs into El when they're both back in Hawkins for the holidays. Dustin's a little better, since he's obsessed with pictures of El's feet post-practice, when they're all gross and bloody and *disgusting*, so he's always commenting on El's posts. And Mike...*god*, Mike's *still* never even met El. Hell, with the exception of one time Will tagged along with Hop and El to one of El's dance things in Indianapolis so he could visit Mike, Will's not even sure Mike and El have ever been in the same city.

(Also, does Mike even know what El looks like and vice versa, while he's thinking about it? Mike almost *never* sits still long enough to have his picture taken, so he's barely in any of Will's pictures or his face is all obscured, and all of El's pictures are on Instagram, where Will knows Mike doesn't have an account.)

So, when El graduates from Columbia and gets a job in Chicago as a school psychologist, Will sees this as the opportunity he's been waiting for – the opportunity to rebuild a relationship with El after drifting apart for so long and to see if El can fully integrate with the Party so two of the biggest parts of Will's life can become one and the same.

One of the first things Will does is throw El a small "Welcome to Chicago" party, inviting pretty much only Greg, Megan, and the rest of the Party. But, naturally, Mike ends up having to cancel last minute after he gets food poisoning (and, man, Will really *is* starting to think Mike and El are *never going to meet*, like some mysterious force in the universe is keeping them apart), so it's only Greg, Will, Lucas, Dustin, and Megan giving El a warm, Chicago welcome – literally; it's over 90 degrees the day Will throws the party, with 85% humidity, and everyone feels like they're *dying*.

That day, Will watches as El reconnects with Lucas, Dustin, and Megan. After a little awkwardness, everyone picks back up like they're back in high school – Lucas and Dustin teasing El with El

teasing them right back, El and Megan commiserating over the boys and reminiscing about when they were in dance club together, stupid nicknames flying left and right....

It's too bad Mike couldn't be here, is what Will thinks as they all sit in his apartment, Will snuggled up against Greg's side, almost all of his favorite people in one place, and he's never been happier.

And then El suggests, when the subject of brunch comes up, that she and Will should meet for regular brunch. It was something she loved while she lived in New York and she knows from Instagram how Will and Greg go out for brunch on a regular basis.

Will thinks it's a *fantastic* idea and, with the way El suddenly becomes busy as she joins a semi-professional dance company *and* her job picks up –

(Something she refuses to talk about in great detail because she's, and Will can quote, "afraid that you and Dustin and Lucas will just *show up* and embarrass me in front of all of my coworkers and you teased me enough back in high school and I won't have it, Billiam Byers, you hear me?", upon which Will just rolls his eyes and says, "Don't call me 'Billiam,'" and changes the subject – some things just aren't worth putting up a fight over).

– weekly brunch pretty much becomes the only time Will sees her. Yeah, sure, he meets up with her a couple times a week for coffee after work or before rehearsal or she joins him for a late night drink. But she has other friends she wants to hang out with in her precious free time and brunch is the *one* thing he can count on without fail. And, no matter how busy El gets, she *always* carves out time to meet up with him and Greg for brunch. That's when Will knows, *for sure*, that their relationship is just as important to her as it is to him and Will finds himself loving her all the more.

So, when El has to cancel brunch because of a Nutcracker performance, Will knows El's really disappointed even though she has a completely legitimate reason. He can hear it in her voice when she calls to let him know she has to cancel and later when she texts him during their normal meetup time while she's warming up for the matinee performance. Plus, Will gets a promise to meet up on a

Saturday the following week instead of Sunday since El doesn't want to miss two brunches in a row. "It's too important to me, spending time with you. I don't want to get in the habit of breaking this promise we made to each other," El says when she calls him in between performances.

Will smiles, touched (it appears some of the Party's rules stuck after all), but there's something in El's voice that catches his attention, a particular flavor of "happy" that makes him suspicious and he can't place *why*.

So, he does his best to ignore it and goes about the rest of his week, which he spends, when it comes to the people he cares about in his life, focusing on Mike and the drama caused by the tumultuous turn this *thing* with this teacher woman of his has taken.

(*honestly, will thinks that mike just needs to man up and make a move or something, from what details mike has chosen to share. but will also knows that mike really isn't in an emotional place to hear the criticism, so the conversations will has with mike are all about reassuring him; that, yes, it sounds really awkward and, yes, it's probably just as uncomfortable for her, too, and, yes, will's sure it'll all work out in the end.*

but, god, will's thisclose to brute forcing his way into finding out who this woman is so he can lock the two of them into a closet or something because, really, kissing solves so many problems.)

But, every once in a while, Will remembers the strange happiness in El's voice. And he *wonders*.

I'll just ask her when I see her on Saturday, Will eventually decides. It's a lot harder for her to weasel out of answering in person.

The Saturday two weeks before Christmas is a crisp, cold, clear Chicago day. Bundled up against the temperatures, Will gets to the restaurant a few minutes after 9 (really, meeting up with El this morning is more *breakfast* than *brunch* if he wants to be technical

about it, but Will understands her crazy schedule. Being a ballet dancer during the holidays seems to be a particular brand of “busy”). The restaurant is a cute, Spanish fusion place, brunch items all served bite-sized and tapas-style. Will’s been here a couple of times before – once with El, even – and it’s a great place to talk and linger over food and drinks.

Once inside, Will starts the process of unbundling as he reaches the hostess station. “Hi, reservation for two under Byers? I think I’m the first one here,” he says, as the hostess, a young woman with half-shaved black hair, turns to look at him.

“You sure are,” she says, thick Chicago accent stretching out the vowels. “Did you want to wait for the rest of your party or did you want to get seated?”

“Seated, please,” Will says. “She’ll find me when she gets here.”

The hostess smiles and it emphasizes the apples of her cheeks, pink and full. “Right this way, then,” she says after a few taps of the screen the seating system is on. Will dutifully follows the young woman through the restaurant and is seated at a table for 2 moments later, left to wait for El to arrive.

Will passes the next few minutes on his phone, checking his various feeds, and gets so wrapped up that he nearly jumps when something taps his shoulder. Head whipping around, Will smiles broadly as he spots El and gets to his feet. “Janie!”

The smile that El gives him in return is bright and sparkling, all flushed cheeks and contagious exuberance. She’s standing there, wearing leggings and a casual sweater, a scarf hanging down from her neck, her hair up in a high ponytail. “Billy!” she exclaims, just as loud, as they embrace in a tight hug.

El’s a good 4 inches shorter than Will is, so her head nestles neatly against his shoulder and he hugs her tight while a cascade of laughter rolls through him. “God, we are horrible people, using nicknames we both hate for each other.”

El giggles and gives him a final squeeze before she pulls back. “It’s

how we show our affection, I guess.” She looks up at him and her eyes practically twinkle with amusement. “Besides, you guys started it first. I was just defending myself and, well, it stuck.”

Will snorts as they move to sit down at the table. “That’s an understatement. The nicknames seem to have stuck like super glue.”

El grins, the expression full of mischief. “Well, then, you’ll be *thrilled* to know that when I tell people about my brother, they all end up thinking your name is ‘Billy’.”

Will wants to glare at her, and he almost does, but he just shrugs. “Well, that’s fair. I tell people your name is ‘Janie’ all the time. Trying to see how many people I can spread it to.”

“See, you get me, you get where I’m going,” El says with a dry laugh. She reaches for the menu and flashes him a conspiratorial smile. “Now, let’s see what drink specials they have today. A seasonal mimosa sounds *heavenly*.”

That peppiness, that *giddy excitement* is back – or just *still here*, Will realizes as he glances down at his own menu, half reading through it and half watching her, curiosity nagging at him like an annoying, persistent itch. So, he gives in. “You’re in a good mood, today. What gives?” Will asks, head tilting just slightly.

El blushes just a bit – embarrassed? Excited? – and the way she smiles back at him is maddeningly placid. “What, I can’t just be in a good mood?” She lets out a small laugh and shakes her head, amused. “I’m just happy. The Nutcracker is almost over, I’m on winter break...life’s good, little brother.”

“Hey now, you’re only a week older than I am,” Will says, eyes narrowing.

El grins. “And, yet, so much wiser.”

Will swats her with the menu – an amazing display of maturity, if there ever was one – and relishes in the way El giggles. “Show you, ‘wiser’,” he grumbles, but he’s smiling, unable to contain his happy amusement.

The two of them settle down after that, ordering the first round of drinks and a handful of small plates, chatting aimlessly about nothing in particular for a little while – the weather, their upcoming respective drives back to Hawkins, last minute Christmas shopping, the horrible drivers out on the road on Will's way to the restaurant.

El's just taken a sip from her second mimosa – hibiscus and berry mixed with the sparkling wine to give it a shocking pink color – when she tilts her head and smiles. “So, where is Greg today, anyway? You in your drunk state couldn't seem to remember what he's doing today instead of having brunch with his amazing sister-in-law.”

Will blushes and takes a sip of his own drink. “We're not married, you know.”

El bats her eyelashes and leans forward so she can rest her face in her cupped hands. “Yet,” she says leadingly. “I mean, you guys have been together for *10 years*.”

Will feels his face heat up even as his heart fills with the normal warm fluttering it usually does whenever he thinks about Greg. “Ok, *mom*,” Will says mockingly. “Anyway, he has a sculpture installation at the gallery to supervise, so that's what he's doing this morning.”

“Ooh, sounds exciting,” El says, lips stretched teasingly.

Will rolls his eyes. “It's not, really,” he says. “You see a handful of movers move one avant-garde statue, you've see'em all.”

“I was kidding, you nerd,” El says. Will wants to laugh at the look on her face – flat, yet exasperated all at the same time – but he doesn't. Especially not when her eyes light up a second later, a grin pulling at her lips as a playful expression takes over her face. “Hey, speaking of nerds....”

Will returns her playful look with a stern one. “Very subtle, great segue,” he says before he smiles. “They're good. I'll be sure to tell them you say hi.” He pauses, one eyebrow raised archly. “Though, if you could *please* stop posting pictures of your feet after practice on Instagram, I would *really* appreciate that.”

El laughs, head tossing back in jubilation. “But, I couldn’t bear to disappoint nougat_lover315. It makes him so happy!”

Will rolls his eyes so hard, he’s surprised they don’t just fall out of his head. “Please, Dustin could use a little *less* excitement. Besides, he shows me those pictures *all the time* and I really don’t need to see it, Janie. I just don’t. I saw it all throughout high school and I’m done, you hear me? *Done*,” he says, gesturing at her with his champagne flute, mimosa sloshing around inside.

El just looks at him, a little prim, a little exasperated, and *a lot* amused. “Well, Dustin’s not the only person who likes those pics, so they’re staying. You’ll just have to live with Dustin’s weird fetish, little brother.” The smile on El’s face is annoyingly teasing and Will almost pouts.

But, still, he can’t help but be amused. “He still insists it’s *not* a fetish,” Will says, chortling. God, he loves Dustin, he *really* does...but the other man is just *weird* about some things.

El almost snorts with the way she breathes out a laugh. “Dustin can yell that until he’s blue in the face – it’s a fetish,” she says, one eyebrow arched to make her point. “Granted, it’s not a *sexual* one, but the point stands.”

“Probably why he’s so insistent about denying that it’s a fetish,” Will says with a laugh. “Doesn’t want to be known as a guy who gets off on feet.”

El joins him in laughing, speaking through the giggles that ripple through her. “God, I’m not sure how Megan puts up with him sometimes.”

Will practically guffaws. “Are you kidding?” he says, almost spitting out the mouthful of his mimosa he’d been drinking. “She *enables* him, finding other places where dancers post pictures of their beat-up feet.”

El just blinks and shakes her head with incredulity. “God, true love takes all kinds of weird forms, doesn’t it?” she asks as she takes a bite of her food. “Anyway,” she says after swallowing. “That’s Dustin.

How about the others? Lucas and” – at this, El pauses, raising her hand to wiggle her fingers in a dramatic, mysterious gesture – “Michael the Paladin.”

“You know,” Will says, lips almost pursed, as he leans back and crosses his arms over his chest. “You don’t have to say his name like that.”

El arches her eyebrows, a look of faux innocence if Will ever saw one. “Like what? I’m ever so sure I don’t know what you mean,” she says, voice just a little too bright and breathy, batting her eyelashes coquettishly.

Will lets out a heavy sigh. “Like he’s Bigfoot or the Lochness Monster, or some other mythical creature,” he says with a vague wave of his hand

It’s El’s turn to roll her eyes, even as she’s smiling with dry amusement. “Well, it’s just that I’ve known you for 14 years, been living in the same city as both you *and* him for the past 4 months, and I’ve *still* never met this mysterious Paladin of yours.” El pauses to take a sip of her drink, gesturing at him with the glass after she lowers it from her mouth. “Hell, if not for the one picture you showed me when we were kids and the handful of blurry and/or out-of-frame shots of him that pop up on your Instagram feed, I would say Mysterious Mike doesn’t exist, that you made him up to sound cool or something. I mean, *really*, is it *that* hard for him to fucking sit still for a picture, or *just be in one*, or something? Does he just not want his face on the internet? He only shows up in your pictures, like, once every 6 months and I’m *still* not even sure what he looks like since, at best, he’s a blurry mess. I can gather is that Mysterious Mike is a bean pole...and that’s about it.”

Will has to laugh at that. “God, ‘Mysterious Mike’, like he doesn’t have a last name,” he says under his breath as he glances up at the ceiling in a bid for deliverance. He looks back down, though, to narrow his eyes at her. “Wait, you don’t even remember what his last name is, do you? Dear lord, you are *horrible* with names.”

“Hey, I can barely remember the names of my co-workers *or* my students – who I see every day, thank you very much – much less the

name of some guy I've *never* met before," El retorts.

Will rolls his eyes – *some things never change*. "But, yeah, ok sure, he's *exactly* the kind of friend I would invent to sound cool. Because all the coolest kids have lanky nerd friends."

El snaps her fingers in a "aw, shoot" gesture. "Darn, you've discovered all our secrets."

Will grins. "Ha! I knew it," he says, playing along before getting to El's earlier question. "But, anyway, he's good – been moody recently for reasons I *don't* want to get into – and Lucas has been freaking out about going home for the holidays."

At that, El's brow furrows. "Why? What's going on?"

Will lets out a sigh. "Well, his mom's freaking out because his *grandma*'s freaking out because Lucas is still single and has never had a serious girlfriend. So, now, according to what his mom told him, his grandma thinks he's gay and is 'panicking,'" Will says, rolling his eyes. "Not that Lucas thinks there would be anything wrong if he *were* gay, but he knows he's gonna be hearing shit about it all Christmas break."

"Yikes," El says with a grimace. "I thought Aunt Christine was bad."

Will snorts. "Yeah, Jonathan was telling me about how she was giving you the whole 'You better find a man before you're too old and ugly' spiel over Thanksgiving."

El groans. "Yes, on top of Joyce's 'Honey, I just don't want you to die alone' bit, which she was also giving Jon the entire weekend, by the way."

Will lets out a laugh. "Hey, if you two can just be single for, like, *ever* so Mom doesn't have time to pester me and Greg about grandkids, that would great, thanks."

"Hey, my personal life is *not* a distraction from *yours*," El says, glaring. But it's the flush that's creeping up her cheeks that grabs Will's attention and, suddenly, all of those earlier, amorphous suspicions about El's good mood are gaining form, alarm bells

beginning to sound off in the back of his head. “El, are you-?” Will starts to say, but the arrival of their server interrupts him.

“Hi, how are we doing over here?” their server asks, a man maybe a little younger than Will and El with long, dark hair pulled back in a low ponytail at the nape of his neck and facial hair scruffy, but trimmed short.

El looks up at him, smiling, and Will *sweats* their server almost fucking swoons. *Go figure*, Will thinks – all El’s ever had to do is bat those beautiful, brown eyes and smile and men just fall at her feet. Not that she’s ever been aware of this, but...*still*. “We’re good, but can we get another order of those little flapjack things?” She then looks over at Will, brow raised with questioning expectation, prompting their server to look at him in return.

Flustered, Will fumbles for the menu they’ve held on to for this exact purpose. “Oh, uh...” he trails off as he scans the menu. He gets distracted a bit when he hears El’s phone go off with the notification of an incoming text message, but he focuses.

“I can come back in a moment, if you want,” the server says.

But Will finds something that caught his eye earlier and relief rushes through him. “No, uh, that’s ok. What do you think of the bulgogi sliders?” Will asks as he looks back up at the server.

The server smiles. “Oh, those are great, especially if you’re a fan of Korean food.”

Will nods. “Ok, and an order of those.”

The server nods in return and walks away, letting Will turn his attention back to El. Her phone’s set down on the edge of the table, right near where her arm is resting against the surface, but that flush on her cheeks is still there and the happy glint in her eyes does nothing to quell the dawning horror growing inside of Will. But she’s smirking at him, shaking her head and it distracts Will long enough – *just what is she so amused about?* “Trying to make me get fat?”

Well, that’s just ridiculous, Will thinks, giving her flat look. He leans

over and gives El a onceover from where she's sitting. Though not as thin as when she was dancing professionally, El is nowhere *near* fat. She's still pretty thin, but she's filled out – hips rounder, breasts fuller, joints not quite so skeletal looking – and now she looks like she's mostly at a normal weight. "Oh, please," Will says. "Like you could ever be *fat*." He grins. "Besides, you could still stand to gain a few pounds."

El scoffs. "I've gained at least 10 pounds since I stopped dancing full-time."

"And now you have hips and boobs, so I'm sure you're just *devastated*," Will says with a roll of his eyes.

El mirrors Will's grin and she tilts her head in acquiescence. "Well, I won't lie. Having boobs *is* nice."

Will arches an eyebrow. "Uh-huh, see? That's what I thought."

El opens her mouth to say something – either a rebuttal or the next beat in their tit-for-tat sibling heckling – but her phone dings with *another* message and, distracted, El turns to look at her phone. The second she looks at her screen, the sappiest smile crosses her lips, her cheeks flushing, and *holy shit*, she's practically glowing as she reaches for her phone to text back whoever just messaged her.

But Will's too focused on the look on her face – happy, glowing, *enraptured* – and he knows, *knows* with a sinking in his stomach, what's going on with her. "Oh god, you've met someone," Will says, not even trying to way he groans as he speaks.

El glances up from where she's focused on finishing up her text message. "Hmm?"

"You, Jane Eleanor Hopper, dating disaster extraordinaire, have found another bottom feeder to latch onto you." Will leans back, crossing his arms over his chest, watching as El just narrows her eyes at him. "So, who is he? Who's this loser you've convinced yourself you're in love with this time? Another dancer who'll flake out on you? A random guy you met at a swanky bar who only wants to get into your pants? A deadbeat who sold you a sob story about how he's

a starving artist or just waiting for his big break so he can mooch off of you?”

El purses her lips and her glare intensifies. “None of those, thank you very much. And I’ll have you know he’s a very nice guy – sweet and funny and smart – and he would never hurt me.”

Will arches an eyebrow in disbelief. “Janie, honey, that’s what you said about James Harmon. Remember him? Remember how that ended?”

El winces and her cheeks turn pink with embarrassment. “You don’t need to bring that up,” she says, voice clouding with past hurt. But she straightens her shoulders and looks Will dead in the eye. “But this one is different, Will, I swear. He’s one of the good ones. I promise.”

Uh-oh, no nicknames. *This is serious.* Sensing he’s in danger of pushing her too far, Will reaches across the table and lays a hand on El’s arm, trying to go for both comforting and supportive. Hopefully, he’s succeeding and, if the way El’s face softens at his touch, he’d say he is. “El, I just don’t want you to get hurt. But, if you say he’s one of the good ones, I’ll try to believe you, ok?”

El gives him a small, grateful smile. “Thanks, little brother.”

The heavy moment lingers for a beat, but passes when Will grins. “So, if he’s one of the good ones, you should have no problem about telling me about him.”

El glares at him – a flat deadpan that is so reminiscent of Mike that Will almost does a double take – and she heaves a sigh. “No.”

Will chortles. “No?”

“No, because if I tell you, you’ll tell Lucas and Dustin, and then all bets are off. Suddenly, the three of you are cyber stalking him and showing up at his house unannounced and giving him the shovel talk – I know Lucas knows his way around a computer – and I won’t have you scaring him off when things are still really new, ok?”

“The shovel talk?” Will says through laughter. What is she on about now?

El sighs, sounding so much like a teenage girl, it's like they've gone back in time 14 years. "You know – 'you hurt my sister and I'll beat you to death with a shovel'."

Will sighs, still laughing, and nods. "Ah, yes, *that* shovel talk. Good times." Will pauses, leveling a look at El. "You do know if he actually hurts you, that's *exactly* what we'll do, yeah?"

El lets out a harsh breath, all exasperation, but, still, she's smiling at him. "Not necessary, but...thanks. I guess it's nice to know that I have you guys in my corner if I ever need it."

"Hey, we're family, that's what we do," Will says.

El furrows her brow, looking uncertain. "So, you're going to be cool about this? About me seeing someone? You're not gonna give me weird looks or make underhanded comments?"

Will wrinkles his nose and pouts. Well, he'd been *planning* on it, but, still.... "Well, now that you've called me out, I guess not," he says, sighing. "I'll try to be cool, I will. No promises though. I'm your brother, not a miracle worker."

Yeah, Will's not cool with it.

Not at all.

Even though El and Will move on from the topic for the rest of breakfast, going on to have a few more small plates and another drink each, Will can't stop thinking about it, can't stop thinking about the impending doom that's headed his way. And, suddenly, his Saturday sucks – *majorly* sucks.

If Will's being honest with himself, he's being a complete drama queen and he knows it. El dating someone is not the end of the world. But they've been through this song and dance so many times and El has just *the worst* taste in men and the odds of her getting hurt again are very, *very* high. He hopes this new guy works out, he really

does, but history is not on their side on this one and Will, as he so rarely does, fears the worst.

It's just before 11:30 when El and Will part ways so El can get to her rehearsal and Will feels cast adrift, unsure about what to do with himself. He really needs to vent to someone, but he's not supposed to meet up with the Party at Dustin's place until 1 and Greg's busy at the gallery.

So Will does the only thing he can think of in the meantime, something to help get his mind off of this: he goes home to sketch.

His sketch book is tucked safely away in the small studio he and Greg cordoned off when they decorated their apartment and Will grabs both it and a couple of charcoals before heading couch in the living room so he can look out through the tall windows that face the street below.

For a while, he loses himself in the simple act of putting pencil to paper, letting whatever takes shape just come to him naturally, freeform and hazy – an unfinished, upper body of someone sitting at a table, elbows perched on the edge of an invisible table; trees rustling as ribbons of wind swirl around them; a cat, curled up in sleep, tail draped over its tiny nose. None of what he's creating is really related to anything in particular, but just the act of drawing, even things that are ordinary and mundane, helps bleed away some of the unease.

He loses track of time a bit and, when Will remembers to check, it's 5 'til 1. It feels like ice water rushes through his veins as he realizes what time it is. "Oh, shit," Will breathes, suddenly scrambling to get up from the couch. It takes 20 minutes to get to Dustin and Megan's apartment from here, which means Will is running *late*. And he *hates* being late. He stashes his sketchbook back in the studio, washes his hands, and gives himself a quick check in the mirror to make sure that he doesn't have charcoal on either his jeans or the dark green Henley he's wearing before he rushes out the door, jacket and scarf in hand, to book it over to Dustin's.

Luck is on Will's side and he only has to wait a minute for the L train to get to the stop by his apartment instead of waiting for minutes on

end in the frigid cold. He amuses himself by passing the time on his phone: scrolling through Twitter, checking his email, commenting on El's most recent Instagram post – a fully body shot of her in her Sugar Plum Fairy costume, smiling so bright she almost outshines the glitter on her face – saying, “Aww, I always knew you were a princess...a spoiled one, that is.”

(Later, what he assumes is during the break El has between performances, he gets an emoji of a face looking distinctly unimpressed as it gives side-eye in reply and Will can't help but laugh when he sees it.)

He gets to Dustin's apartment in just under 20 minutes and the look on Dustin's face when he answers the door makes Will want to punch him in the face. “Dude, you're late. You're *never* late. You and Greg better have been having crazy hot sex or something, ‘cause otherwise, I’m gonna think you don’t care about me anymore,” Dustin says with the biggest, shit-eating grin on his face.

Will cringes as he feels his face heat up. “Yeah, okay, *no*, that’s not what was happening – and if it was, it wouldn’t be any of your business. I just got...caught up in stuff.” He peers into Dustin’s apartment, looking past the other man. “Are the others here?” he asks as Dustin lets him in. But it’s a dumb question, though, and Will knows it because Dustin’s apartment is *silent*. If any of the rest of the Party were here, it’d be noisy as shit.

“Not yet,” Dustin says before he closes the door behind Will. “Lucas is also uncharacteristically running late and Mike, well....”

Will rolls his eyes. “Mike’s being Mike, got it. He *is* showing up today, right? Not like on Thursday when he bailed?”

Dustin shrugs as they enter the kitchen. “Hasn’t said anything otherwise, so I’m assuming yes. Hopefully the stick’s been removed from his ass by the time he *does* show up, though,” he says, pausing to look back at Will. “You want a beer?”

Will shrugs a shoulder. “Yeah, sure, if you’re offering.”

“I wonder what’s going on with him,” Dustin says, getting back to

their previous conversation as he goes through the motions of grabbing a couple of beers out of the fridge.

Will bites the inside of his cheek while he considers how to answer. Because he *knows* what's going on with Mike (or, at least, he knows enough), but he also know that Mike isn't ready to share with the others. Especially given the dramatic turn the past week has taken with this woman Mike's met. So, Will just sighs. "You know Mike, he can be moody and insular. When he's ready, though, he'll open up." It's the truth, yes...just not the *whole* truth. So why does Will feel like he's just uttered the biggest lie ever?

But, Dustin just nods, noticing none of Will's inner turmoil, as he opens up the beers and passes one over to Will. "Yeah, you're right." He takes a sip of his beer. "C'mon, let's go hang out by the TV while we wait for Lucas and Mike."

Will follows Dustin through the apartment he shares with Megan – all clean lines and comfy surfaces, well-worn furniture and bright splashes of color, hints of their two cats from the random toy here or there – to settle down on the couch, Dustin pulling up Netflix on the TV.

Lucas shows up while Will and Dustin are still trying to figure out what to watch and then it's the *three* of them debating over what to watch, a debate that Lucas ends when he queues up a random episode of "Star Trek: The Next Generation" on Netflix, shutting all of them up for a little while.

But, the entire time, Will's still thinking about what he learned from El earlier, still mulling over the fact that his sister is dating and how it's going to end horribly like it always does. He's trying not to let it infect his mood, but he can't help it, and he just knows he's going to end up ranting about this sooner rather than later.

So, Will lets himself sink further and further into his sulk and is just shy of pouting when Mike finally arrives about 20 minutes later.

"Hey, sorry I'm late," Mike says when he walks in, just behind Dustin who'd gotten up to answer the door.

“Man, you’re *always* late,” Lucas says from where he’s sitting lengthwise, legs outstretched, on the small sofa that’s perpendicular to the larger couch where Will is currently parked.

Mike plops onto the armchair that faces the small sofa Lucas is on while Dustin moves to retake his seat next to Will. “Yeah, yeah,” Mike says with a roll of his eyes as he flashes Lucas the finger. “Bite me.”

Lucas snickers. “No thanks, you might like that too much.”

The look that Mike gives Lucas in response – dry, exasperated, derisive – is just so *Mike*, that everyone else can’t help but laugh. Will takes a moment while the others bicker and tease good-naturedly to look over at Mike, trying to get a sense of how he’s feeling, especially after the week Will knows he’s had. And, beneath the “fuck you” expression on Mike’s face, there’s something in the set of his shoulders, in the way the corners of his lips quirk up, that speaks to a certain happiness, a sense of elation that is almost smug in its jubilation.

Maybe things worked out with that teacher woman, Will thinks, happy for Mike if that’s the case. Mike is one of the most caring, generous people Will knows and he deserves to be happy.

(also, he wonders what this woman mike seems to have fallen for is like. is she another science teacher like him? or does she teach another subject? will likes to think that she's a fellow science teacher – really, it's just that he has a hard time picturing mike with anyone who's not as nerdy as he is.)

But Will’s happiness for Mike sits in stark contrast to the dread he feels over *El’s* new relationship status and his stomach crawls with guilt over the hypocrisy. It makes him feel like a horrible person, being a hypocrite, and Will’s not sure how to think about that. But, it still doesn’t erase the fact that he is Not Happy that his sister is dating again and Will would do almost *anything* to avoid the horrible fallout he knows is waiting down the line. Because it’s going to be horrible and Will’s gonna get stuck cleaning up the aftermath, he just *knows* it.

Something of what Will's feeling must be written all over his face, because it's only when Mike looks over and asks "Hey, what's wrong?" that Will realizes he's *actually* pouting.

Damn you for being so perceptive, Will thinks as he sighs and burrows deeper into the couch, feeling like a 5-year old pouting over a lost toy and not even caring right at this moment. "It's...stupid. Just something that happened while I was hanging out with Janie this morning."

Dustin lets out a small laugh. "Aww, how is the Princess?"

Will rolls his eyes and looks over at Dustin. "She hates it when you call her that, just so you know."

"Oh, she knows I do it because I love her," Dustin says with a snort. "Besides, it's not like she doesn't have mean nicknames for all of us, either." Dustin pauses, head tilting as he thinks. "Well, except for Mike because she's still never met him."

Will laughs, though it's a dry, humorless sort of laugh. "Oh, no, she has a nickname for him, too – a couple, actually."

Lucas laughs, too. "That sounds like her."

"Hey, is there a reason I've *still* never met Janie?" Mike asks, one eyebrow arched questioningly. "I mean, she's been living in Chicago for a few months now and I've still never met her. If I didn't know any better, I'd think you made her up, or something." He grins, eyes sparkling with humor. "Unless, *again*, there's a reason you don't want me meeting your step-sister, Byers," Mike says, eyebrows wagging. "Not that I'm looking or anything, but...."

Will tries to picture Mike with El and finds the resulting mental picture, though thoroughly disgusting, *a million times better* than the thought of whoever his sister is simpering over now and, god, he'd take it in a heartbeat. "God, I know you're just kidding, but you'd be such an improvement over the losers she ends up dating, it's not even funny," Will groans, one hand coming up to rub over his eyes and down his face.

Dustin hisses a breath between his teeth. “Oh no, I know that tone. She’s not....”

“She’s dating again, isn’t she?” Lucas asks, arms folding over his chest, face set in a stern, disapproving mask.

“Yes,” Will spits out, relieved to finally have the opportunity to rant about this. Is it petty as fuck? Absolutely. Does Will care? Not one goddamn bit. “She’s with this new guy and she won’t talk about him *at all* and it’s pissing me off because she has horrible taste in men – just the *worst* – so the likelihood of this guy being a complete loser is about 1000%.”

Mike cringes. “Her track record that bad, huh?” he asks and the rest of the Party immediately lets out groaning laughter.

“God, I forget sometimes you haven’t had front row seats to the dating disaster that is Hurricane Janie,” Dustin says with a shake of his head.

“She’s one of those people who should probably be single forever,” Lucas adds.

“Like, there was that one guy who stole her TV *and* her cat after a couple months of dating,” Will says.

“Hey, remember that guy who two-timed her with her coworker?” Dustin asks.

“Or Chris Jenkins, who cheated on her sophomore year,” Lucas pipes up.

“Matt Post senior year who dumped her because she wouldn’t, quote, ‘put out’,” Dustin says with a roll of his eyes.

“And don’t forget her last boyfriend,” Will says. “Who mooched off of her for *months* and then had the gall to tell her that she owed him all this money for, quote-unquote, ‘the sacrifice he made for her by promoting her career instead of his own’.”

“God, what’s that even mean?” Dustin asks, brow furrowed, lips pulled down in a frown.

“Fuck if I know,” Will says with a heavy sigh. “Point is, she attracts nothing but horrible men over and over and over and I’m the one left to pick up the pieces after they break her heart and I’m sick and tired of it.”

Mike lets out a huffed laugh, shaking his head. “Jesus, Will, your step-sister sounds like a real piece of work.”

Will looks over at Mike with a faux glare and hurls the throw pillow next to him over at Mike, smacking him in the shoulder. “Hey, lay off my sister, Wheeler. Only *I* get to call her that.”

Mike holds up both of his hands in a surrendering motion, even as he’s grinning with smug cleverness. “Yessir, laying off your sister. There will be no laying *on* your sister.”

Will shudders. “Ugh, *gross*, fuck you, dude. No talking about Janie and sex in the same sentence, I beg of you.”

Lucas huffs a sigh. “Alright, enough talking like a bunch of gossips. Are we gonna play Call of Duty or what?”

The Party moves on quickly after that and, for a while, all thoughts of El’s love life are banished from Will’s mind.

Banished...but not forgotten.

Turns out, Mike was right earlier about how he’s never going to stop smiling.

It hasn’t even been 12 hours since El first kissed him, but it’s *completely* upended his entire life. He’s lying in bed, a few minutes before midnight and just over an hour since he talked to El on the phone, and he swears his face is going to freeze with a permanent smile.

If his smile starts to fade, all it takes is just the simplest thought of her to have his lips curling up again. And, since Mike *cannot* stop

thinking about El, he's smiling practically all the time, his mind racing with thoughts of *her*. He can still hear the sound of her voice through the phone, all soft and sleepy, set against the gentle backdrop of rustling sheets and longing sighs, making him wish he could be with her, right next to her beneath those sheets so he could hear her voice and feel her sighs in person.

And it takes no effort at all to recall the feel of her lips on his, pliant and teasing, overwhelming and all-consuming, or to remember the way her skin felt beneath his palms, soft and warm, or the sound she made as they traded deep, hot kisses, all high pitched whimpers and breathy moans and *oh god*, he's *never* going to get over this. Even more, he doesn't *want* to. He was hooked from that very first kiss in the hallway just outside his classroom and now he never wants to do anything else. No other woman has affected him in the way that El does and Mike knows that's going to be true for the rest of his life.

Mike falls asleep that night, mind full of *her*, feeling more content and happier than he has in a long, long time, corners of his lips tugged up in a soft, lovesick smile....

...A smile that is still on his face when he wakes up.

Thoughts of El while awake before bed turn into dreams of her while he sleeps and, as Mike lays in bed, the early rays of the morning sun creeping in through his window, he chases the fading remnants of those dreams, trying to hold on to memories that vanish like smoke when he grasps too tightly.

But there's still enough remaining for Mike to piece together snippets, flashes of memory that make him smile and sigh and even blush, his veins filling with soft, warm heat, a complicated swirl of affection, burgeoning love, and desire.

(limbs entwined, surrounded by a sea of white sheets, pressed skin to skin as they sit in bed together, trading soft and lingering kisses. the press of her thighs warm against the bare skin of his waist as she straddles his lap, the heat of her bleeding into the tops of his thighs. his hands brushing through her hair, down the length of her spine, gripping at her hips. her fingers dancing across his shoulders, his chest, his sides. they're all giggles and whispered moans and soft sighs, surrounded by nothing but happiness)

(and together, and he's never been more in love in his entire life.)

Mike shivers at the sensations that roll through him and he *hopes* he gets to experience even a fraction of what his dreams tempt him with. But, moreover, all the dreams make him want to do is see El *right now*.

That's not going to happen, though – it's just before 8 in the morning and Mike knows that El has plans within the next couple of hours. But that doesn't mean he can't *talk* to her.

Grinning, Mike sits up to reach for his phone, shivering as the air outside of his blankets hits his bare chest – he runs hot and rarely sleeps with a shirt on, even in the winter, even it means shivering like this early on a cold, winter morning – and he takes refuge back under the covers once his phone is in hand. Warm and cozy, laying with his head cushioned on his pillows, Mike calls El and puts her on speaker so he doesn't have to hold the phone awkwardly to his ear. Instead, he rests the phone on his blanket-covered chest while he listens to it ring a couple of times.

It's just before the third ring when the line clicks with the call being picked up and Mike's heart leaps into his throat when he hears El's voice. "Hey, there," El says. There's a hint of a giggle in her voice, a soft happiness that sets Mike's leaping heart into a flutter that pounds deliriously against the inside of his ribcage.

"Morning," Mike says, the word coming out in a croak, and he's almost happy he's alone so El can't see him cringe.

But that hint of a giggle turns into an *actual* giggle and all of Mike's embarrassment just vanishes. "You just wake up?" El asks.

"Haven't even gotten out of bed yet," Mike says.

El lets out a sigh. "So, you're telling me you're lying in bed right now? Tease."

"Why, wishing you were still in bed?" Mike asks with a laugh.

"Well, in *someone's* bed, yes," El says, tone full of the kind of suggestion that hits Mike like a punch to the gut.

“Jesus Christ, El,” Mike says around a groan, closing his eyes as he presses his head deeper against the pillow. “You can’t just *say* things like that.”

“Oh, so now you’re asking me not to tell the truth?” El says, teasing. “Suddenly, I’m afraid of how this relationship is going to go. Maybe I should just cut my losses now....”

Mike lets out a snort. “Yeah, right, you’re not getting rid of me that easily,” he says. “Besides, I never said you *couldn’t* say things like that ever. But it’s all just talk if you don’t follow through, so....”

“Hey, I’ll have you know I have *excellent* follow through,” El says and, from the sound of her voice, is clearly trying to hold back her giggles.

“Hmm, I’ll believe it when I see it,” Mike says. God, he feels like the biggest fool, smiling like he is right now. But he also doesn’t care one tiny bit. “Speaking of talk without follow through, or the *ability* to follow through....” Mike trails off in a sigh. “I really do wish you were here. Because I *really* want to kiss you right now.”

There’s a sharp, intake of breath from the other end of the line and the sound of El gasping shoots straight down his spine. “Yeah?” she says, something rustling in the background. Mike wonders where she is right now, if she’s still at home...if she’s still in *bed*.

“Yeah,” Mike says, his voice pitching lower, sounding almost husky. “I dreamed about it last night.”

“Oh?” El says, still sounding breathless. “Were we doing anything else besides kissing?”

At that, Mike grins. “Well, if you were here, I could *show* you....”

“C’mon, Writer Man, you should be able to paint me a picture with those words of yours.”

For a moment, Mike lets memories of his dream rush into the forefront of his mind and he wonders, for a brief moment, if her skin is as soft as his dreams make it out to be. But then he chuckles. “Some things transcend words. Still, makes me wonder how well my

dreams will live up to reality.”

The noise that comes through the line is what Mike can best describe as a breathy whimper and he bites back the groan that builds in his throat. “Getting a little ahead of yourself, don’t you think?” El says, the words pitching high and just as breathy as her whimpering.

“Hmm, gives me something to strive for, actually.” God, Mike almost can’t believe he’s flirting with El like this...and that she’s flirting back.

“Yes, it’s good to have goals,” El says with faux seriousness. “And, just so you know, I 100% support you in your pursuit of those goals.”

Despite the blatant flirtatiousness that heats him from within and makes his skin feel two sizes too small, Mike almost can’t hold back his laughter. “Completely altruistic, I’m sure. No self-interest at all here.”

“Naturally,” El says, almost primly. “I am nothing if not altruistic.” She pauses, letting out a giggle. “But, if I should so happen to *benefit* from your pursuit of these goals, well then...that’s just a bonus, right?”

“My, my, opportunistic, aren’t we?” Mike teases, unable to keep from chuckling a little, his words a little breathless, a side effect of their topic of conversation. They are literally flirting about having sex and, *holy shit*, how is this his life now? How did he get so goddamn lucky?

“Hey, carpe diem, I always say,” El says and Mike swears he can hear her smiling.

“Ooh, Latin, smart *and* sexy.”

Another giggle, causing Mike’s heart to skip a few beats. “Charmer.” El pauses, sighing. “So, other than flirting, why did you call?”

Mike echoes El’s sigh. “Just wanted to hear your voice.” The mood has shifted, the playfulness receding a bit as wistful longing begins to take over.

“I can’t wait to see you tonight,” El says, her voice soft and intimate

in a way that makes Mike shiver. God, he wants to see her *so bad*, he can almost taste it.

“Me neither,” Mike says. “I’m looking forward to seeing you perform.”

El lets out a soft gasp. “Really?”

Mike nods, hair shifting between his head and the pillow. “Yeah, really. You’re amazing, El, and I bet you steal the whole show when you’re on stage. Why *wouldn’t* I want to see that?”

There’s a beat, the only noise the sound of El’s sharp intake of breath, before she speaks again. “How are you...god, I just don’t get it.”

Mike’s brow furrows and he lifts a hand to prop beneath his head. “Don’t get what?”

“How you were single up until now,” El says, her tone filled with incredulity. “You’re just so sweet and funny and charming and you make me feel like the luckiest woman on the face of the planet and I....” She stops with a sigh and Mike *desperately* wants her to continue. His heart pounds hard inside his chest and his skin flushes from the warmth of her compliment. No woman has *ever* told him what El’s telling him right now and he needs to hear more. “You’re amazing, Mike.”

“You make me want to be,” Mike says, his words just above a whisper. “It’s all for you, El. *Everything*.” He’s getting dangerously close to admitting that he’s falling in love with her and it takes way more effort than it should to keep those words back. *Slow your roll there, Romeo. Don’t be that guy.*

There’s another gasp, follow quickly by a longing sigh. “You have no idea how badly I want to kiss you right now,” El says, voice hushed.

Mike draws in a shaky breath. “Oh, no, I think I probably do,” he says, pressing his lips together to try and quell the way they’re currently tingling, *itching* to kiss her again. Yeah, he’ll be surprised if either of them have a chance to get a word in at all when they see each other again. Because something tells him they’re just going to

skip straight to kissing. Not that he minds. *God*, why would he?

“So,” El says, a hint of a tremor in her voice. “What do you have planned for today? *Besides* being a nerd with your nerd friends.”

Mike hurries to answer, grateful for the distraction. If he dwells much longer on how much he wants to kiss her (or just *wants* her), he’s going to go crazy. “I dunno, exactly. Was maybe going to try and get some writing in. And, hey, enough of making fun of me and my friends.”

El giggles. “You say that like I don’t like the fact that you’re a nerd. It’s one of my favorite things about you.”

The smile that lifts up the corners of Mike’s lips feels like it’s threatening to embed permanently into his face. “Just *one* of your favorite things, huh?” Mike glances at the clock on his nightstand – 8:15. “You know, I’d ask for a list, but I’m pretty sure you need to get going soon.”

El lets out a delicate snort. “You sound very confident in the length of the list,” she teases.

Mike *very deliberately* does not touch the incredibly obvious double entendre that presents itself to him – *whether El’s aware of it is another story, but, knowing her...she probably is* – and he lets out a laugh. “Hey, I have to have hope, you know? You have plenty of time to cut me down to size, just...let me have this, ok?”

“Humble is definitely on the list, by the way,” El says almost dryly before she sighs. “But, you’re right. I do need to get going – actually, I need to finish getting *ready*, first.”

At that, Mike grins, snickering. “Ooh, so, what are you wearing?” he asks, teasing.

“Wouldn’t *you* like to know?” El says in a way that has Mike’s breath hitching in his chest. Ok, he wasn’t expecting *that*....

“You’re gonna kill me, you damn tease,” Mike says with a strangled groan.

“Payback for earlier,” El says, her voice sparkling with mischief. “But, I do have to go, so....” She trails off in a sigh.

Mike nods, stomach sinking a bit. God, he just wants to keep talking to her forever and ever. “Yeah, ok. I’ll see you tonight, though, after your performance.”

“Count on it.” Another sigh. “Bye, Mike. Have fun today, yeah?”

“You, too,” he says. “Bye El.” It’s official, he *hates* saying goodbye to her, Mike thinks as he hangs up the phone. He presses his phone close to his chest with his palm and sighs.

Maybe, someday, he won’t *have* to say goodbye.

Maybe, hopefully, someday.

Mike’s Saturday passes in a blur of eager excitement and jittery anticipation. After he finally gets out of bed and showers, he runs a couple of quick errands and does a bit of writing that he’s not 100% sure is going to last past a first edit, all the while fretting and jittering about what’s going to happen 12 hours from now. He tries to ease his anticipation by texting El on and off throughout the morning and early afternoon, but it only helps a little. He just can’t wait to see El, can’t wait to find out what’s in store for them *after* her evening performance when she cashes in that raincheck for a celebratory dinner. It’ll be the first time since they kissed that they’ll spend any decent amount of time together and just the thought of spending a few hours makes him all tingly with excitement.

Mike gets so caught up in his own mess of emotions that, naturally, he leaves the house late to meet up with the rest of the Party, arriving at Dustin’s apartment almost 45 minutes late. Not that he missed much – the others are about halfway through a random TNG episode. But, they soon move on to split screen matches of Call of Duty not long after Mike gets there and, for a few hours, Mike lets himself get lost in the familiar routines of hanging out with the best

friends who are all but his brothers, laughing and joking and giving each other shit. The only unusual part of the whole routine is Will's kvetching about his step-sister's train wreck of a love life.

(For real, though, there are times where Mike *really* isn't sure Janie exists. Like, yes, he'd heard her voice over the phone or during Skype calls with Will while he lived in Indianapolis, her voice always muffled through the connection. But it was *years* ago and all he remembers are the vague sounds of generic teenage girl angst. Besides, she never stepped into view during Skype calls, so he has no idea what she looks like, which makes it easier for him to doubt her existence.)

Oh, sure he knows she exists, but he doesn't *believe* it, has a hard time imagining this girl who became part of the rest of the Party's lives after he moved away. He's sure it doesn't help that there have been so many times where he was supposed to have met her, but didn't for some strange twist of fate. *Maybe I'm not meant to meet her*, is a thought Mike's had a few times. Still, if it's meant to be, he'll meet her when he meets her and, hopefully, he'll be able to laugh with her over how their paths seemed like they would never cross. She sounds pretty cool, from some of the stories he's heard, so hopefully they can be friends.)

But, at the end of the day, Mike really doesn't care about Janie and Will's angst over her dating life.

No, who he's really focused on is *El*. Even when he's focusing on having fun with the Party, the undercurrents of his thoughts are filled with her – of spending time with her, watching her perform, getting to talk to her, touch her, kiss her.

So Mike counts down what feels like the minutes until he needs to leave to get ready to head off to the ballet (*a thought he never expected to have*). The ballet starts at 7, so Mike knows he needs to leave Dustin's by 5 in order to get ready in time.

The closer it gets to 5, the more excited Mike gets until it feels like he's going to vibrate out of his own damn skin. By the time it's quarter to 5, the wait is *unbearable* and Mike knows he can't stay at Dustin's apartment any longer, that he needs to get out of there to

start getting ready so the waiting can end and the evening can actually begin.

One problem, though: the Party's original plans are for the rest of the evening and Mike hasn't told the others that he's ditching them for the night. And, while Mike's not sure what he's going to say when he gets up to leave in the next minute or so, he knows he's not going to admit that he's going to the ballet. No, he's going to get enough shit for ditching literally last second as it is; no need to add insult to *that* injury.

Mike looks around the living room during a break between COD multiplayer matches, video game controller held loosely in his hands, and decides to just rip off the bandaid. So, Mike leans over and sets the controller on the coffee table while he stands up. "Hey guys, I need to get going."

Three heads whip over to look at him, all with almost identical annoyed, shocked expressions on their faces. "Dude, you're ditching us? *Again?* What gives?" Dustin asks.

"Yeah, man," Lucas chimes in. "This is becoming really fucking annoying, Mike."

Guilt wars with annoyance – *he is a full grown adult with his own life, thank you very much* – but Mike leans more towards being chastised than chagrined. "Sorry, guys. It's just...something came up kind of last minute." Thoughts of exactly what caused the change in plans and why – *soft lips, gentle smiles, sparkling gaze, happy and flirty* – surface in Mike's mind and he can't help the way his cheeks heat up.

Will grins, annoyance fading into amusement. "Mike, you're blushing."

Dammit, the jig is up. Mike sighs. "I, um...kind of have a date tonight," he says in a rush, words tripping over themselves on their way out his mouth. El may not be considering tonight a date, but Mike sort of is. Or, at least, he's unable to stop thinking about it as a date.

For a moment, there is a silence so deafening, it feels like Mike's heart is going to explode from the awkwardness. But then, Dustin

practically *guffaws*, face splitting in a broad grin. “Oh my god, it’s that hot teacher woman, isn’t it? She is hot, right? Tell me she’s hot.”

Mike feels his face heat up even more (seriously, has he always been this transparent?) and opens his mouth to say *something*, but Lucas beats him to the punch. “I knew it, I *knew* you had a crush on her.”

Ok, it’s starting to feel like his face is going to burn off, he’s blushing so hard. “Yeah, ok, I’m going to go now,” Mike says. “Feel free to make fun of me *after* I leave, please.”

“Hey, no, wait,” Will says. “We’re happy for you, man. You deserve to be happy.”

“Yeah,” Dustin echoes. “I mean, we’re not gonna stop teasing you, but this is great.”

Mike narrows his eyes, skepticism swirling in his stomach. “Yeah?”

Lucas nods. “Yeah, man. Will’s right: you *do* deserve to be happy.” He pauses, grinning. “So, what are you guys doing tonight? You wining and dining her? Pulling out all the stops?”

At this, it’s Mike’s turn to grin. Because, no matter what how hard they try, they’ll *never* be able to guess and it’s going to bother them so fucking much. “I’m not telling you guys *anything*,” he says, biting on the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling too hard. “So, with that, I’ll see you guys later.” Mike offers them a jaunty salute before he turns to leave, accompanied by the sounds of groans and jeers from the rest of his friends and feeling buoyant for a number of reasons, most of them having to do with El and how excited he is to see her.

Once at home, it doesn’t take Mike long to get ready. He reheats a quick dinner of some leftover pasta, careful not to eat too much but knowing he needs to eat *something* since dinner with El won’t be for several hours, before he goes to get dressed.

There’s a bit of agonizing over what to wear – Mike knows El said that clothes like he wears for work are fine, but that doesn’t really help when his anxiety and excitement are at all-time highs – but he

eventually settles on a pair of black, fitted slacks and a tailored, navy blue button down. He almost reaches for a tie, but he decides against it before his hand can even twitch in response. *No need to get super formal*, he thinks as he slips on his shoes and turns to head for the bathroom.

Mike's dress shoes clack against first the hardwood floor of his bedroom and then the tile of his bathroom as he moves from room to room to finish up. For a moment, Mike just looks at himself in the mirror, nose scrunching a bit as he takes in the image reflected back at him, and he can't help but wonder just what El sees in him. Especially not when he knows the truth that's staring back at him: skin a little too pale, cheeks blotched with freckles, nose a tad too strong for the high sweep of his cheekbones, hair an untamable mess.

He knows he's not, like, super hideous, or anything; like it could be so, so much worse. But El is just so fucking gorgeous; she can have any man she wants and, somehow, she's chosen *him*. He's not going to lie; there's part of him that's scared that one day, she'll take one look at him and realize that she's made a horrible mistake, that she could do *so much better*.

Nervousness, self-pity, and elation war inside Mike's chest and he has to gulp against the emotion that swells inside of him. "Don't overthink this. Don't psych yourself out," he whispers to himself in an attempt to calm down before he forces himself to focus on the task at hand – namely, trying to figure out how to wrangle his hair under some kind of control.

But his phone buzzes inside his pocket before he can figure out his approach and, with a sigh, Mike reaches for his phone. His heart leaps into his throat when he sees El's name flash across his screen with an incoming text message and all his worries suddenly feel very far away as he reads what she wrote: *Been thinking about you all day. Can't wait for tonight.*

Mike's breath hitches in his throat as his heart skips what feels like a multitude of beats and he suddenly feels warm, unable to keep from smiling. In this moment, all his anxiety bleeds away and the excitement he's been feeling all day rushes to fill in the empty spaces. He feels like he's on the precipice of becoming completely untethered

from gravity, like he's just going to float away on a cloud of happiness at any moment.

His fingers are dancing across the screen to type out a reply before he's even consciously aware of what he's going to say. *Me too. Just about to walk out the front door to come see you.*

Be still my heart, is what he gets back and, feeling brave, he replies with just the emoji that is winking and blowing a kiss (*dear god, what is happening to him?*) before slipping the phone back into his pocket.

Uplifted by the brief text message exchange, Mike hurries to finish getting ready. He dips his hands under the faucet before running his wet fingers through his hair and, after drying his hands off, reaches for the small bottle of cologne Nancy got him for Christmas a couple of years ago that he's rarely used. *Well, if there was ever a time for it*, Mike thinks. He's careful not to overdo it and, a couple of moments later, he's grabbing his jacket and scarf before heading out the door.

There's a quick, mental debate over whether to drive or take the L, but Mike eventually settles on driving. This way, he can drive El home and maximize how much time he gets to spend with her (*and maybe even make out in the car a little before walking her to her door, if he's lucky*) before she leaves for the holidays tomorrow, effectively ditching him. Mike's own holiday plans are to head back to Indianapolis the following Wednesday, so he can't be too sad she's leaving tomorrow, not when he's leaving so soon after.

Still, Mike finds himself pouting a little as he gets into the car. He *really* doesn't want to be separated from her by however many miles there are between Indianapolis and wherever her hometown is, not when all of this is so new and they *just* kissed. But, like he thought yesterday when he realized they weren't going to get to go out on an official date until after the New Year, he's not about ask El to rearrange their entire lives together when they're really just starting out.

(And they are just starting out, aren't they? There's an ocean of endless possibilities at their fingertips, futures where they're together and happy and blissfully in love. Mike's brain starts spinning out reels of fantasies, fantasies of a life together, just the two of them;

fantasies of dating and marriage and family and *everything* – and it just takes his breath away if he dwells on those fantasies for too long, so he shelves them away for a rainy day...or at least a day when the future he dreams of is less of a fantasy and more of a real possibility.)

It's a slow drive over to the theater where El's dance company holds its performances and, once he *does* get there, it takes a little while to find parking. But, at quarter to 7, Mike finally walks into the lobby of the theater, looking around to see where Will Call is. People just as dressed up as he is, some even more causal, mill around, the sound of their voices echoing in the cavernous space, dim lighting accentuating the dark ceiling with gilded trim and posters of previous shows that line the walls.

Mike spots the Will Call box office and pushes his way through the crowds of people, more than he would have expected. *Guess more people come to the ballet during Christmas than I thought*, Mike thinks as he approaches the glass that separates him from the theater employee inside the box office. The man, maybe 30 years older than Mike, notices and offers a polite smile. "Hi, sir, can I help you?"

"Hi, yes, there should be a ticket held for me here? Um, under Mike Wheeler?" Mike says, stuffing his hands into his pockets out of nervous habit.

The man just smiles, full of good cheer, eyes sparkling and cheeks dimpling. "Just a moment, sir." His hands move out of sight, just below the pane of glass separating him from Mike. But Mike can hear the rustling of papers and, a few moments later, the man holds up a ticket with a slip of paper clipped to it. "Ah, here we are!" he says, grinning. "Looks like you're a special guest of one of our dancers. Just find an usher after the show is over and show them the piece of paper. They'll lead you backstage," the man says as he hands the ticket through the slot beneath the window.

Mike dips his fingers in so he can grab both pieces of paper and he flips the ticket over so he can see what's written on the accompanying piece of paper. It's a makeshift pass, written on the stationary of the theater, signed by who Mike can only guess is the House manager. And on the piece of paper, above the signature, it reads "VIP Guest for El Hopper. Allow backstage after performance."

Mike gulps. Here it is, a literal ticket to see El. His heart can barely handle the wait that's yet to come. Taking in a deep breath, Mike looks back at the ticket to figure out where he's sitting...

...And has no idea how to interpret the seating assignment. His brow furrows as he sees the words "SEC" and "ORCH" and he's so very confused.

"First time at the ballet?"

Mike looks up at the man in the Will Call office and blushes. "That obvious, huh?"

The man smiles, not unkindly, and tilts his head in a quick expression of assent. "When you've been around as long as I have, you learn to recognize those who are little lost. Just show your ticket to any of the ushers – those are the people in the black uniforms with the gold name tags. Any of them will be able to show you to your seat."

Mike offers the man a smile, feeling relieved at the man's understanding. "Thanks."

The man gives Mike one last smile. "Not at all. Enjoy the show!"

Excitement flutters in Mike's chest and his smile only grows. "I think I will." He gives the man a nod in farewell and turns to find an usher to help him to his seat.

It turns out Mike's sitting in the Orchestra section, about 3/4ths of the way back from the stage. There's a tier above and behind him, the balcony section, so he could be further away. But, it's a pretty good seat, Mike realizes as he sits down. He's maybe a few seats away from the center of the row and he's just about eye level with the stage, so he should have a good view of everything.

The house lights are still on, the last people taking their seats, so Mike takes a moment to look at the program the usher handed him, never feeling more out of place than he does in this very moment and hoping that *something* in the program will help orient him.

And the program does help...a little. There's a brief history of the dance company, a more in-depth history of The Nutcracker, a few

pages describing the upcoming performance season. And, in the middle of the program, the cast and their roles, separated by which act of the ballet they first appear in.

Mike's a bit dismayed to find El's name showing up in Act II, but he raises his eyebrows when he sees that she's playing the Sugar Plum Fairy. He'd hadn't asked what role she was playing – he doesn't know enough to make heads or tails of most of what El talks about when she talks about ballet – but he knows enough about The Nutcracker, just from cultural osmosis, to know that the Sugar Plum Fairy is probably the best known character in the ballet. *Well, it's the one everyone always mentions, at any rate.*

Mike feels a surge of pride – pride that El's so talented, pride that he has the privilege to know her, pride that she keeps working at her craft and is so humble about it all the while – and he can't stop the gentle smile that stretches across his lips. El's just so amazing and he is so, so glad that he's gotten the chance to meet her, to become friends with her...to fall in love with her.

Before Mike can get too caught up in his thoughts and the way they make his heart race and his skin flush with warmth, the lights dim, the room hushes, and the orchestra begins tuning up. Mike hurries to pay attention, not wanting to be rude and miss anything. He's here because El asked him to be here and he's going to keep an open mind and try to enjoy the performance.

The ballet gets underway within minutes and it only takes Mike about 15 minutes or so to come to the conclusion that the ballet isn't half bad. Honestly, Mike can see why people enjoy coming to the ballet: there's nice looking sets and pretty costumes and amazing dancing, all set to live music. It engages so many of the senses and it's an incredible display of human achievement and talent. Mike finds himself getting caught up in the story before he's even aware what's happening: a family gathered for a Christmas Eve party, a young girl enchanted by a nutcracker, the nutcracker coming to life to battle against a mouse army.

By the time the first act is over and it's Intermission, Mike realizes that this is something he might enjoy even if he weren't here because of a woman (*not just any woman*, his brain whispers to the

accompanying pitter patter of his heart, *your new girlfriend and the potential love of your life*). It's art, pure and simple, and Mike has so many things he suddenly wants to ask El, like what her favorite ballet is, either to watch or to perform in. Or how the female dancers learn to get up on their toes like that and how old they are when they start. Or how male ballet dancers get so fucking ripped.

He's just filled with questions and he spends most of the intermission mulling them over before he retakes his seat for. Mike finds himself sucked back in, enthralled and enchanted. Many of the songs he hears, he recognizes from things like Fantasia and other places (really, maybe one of the more surprising things is how many of the songs from this ballet are just part of the everyday, background culture).

But then, El comes onto the stage and nothing else matters.

She's *beautiful*, just radiant and amazing and so, so gorgeous. She's a vision of white and gold and silver, the white bodice and skirt of her costume embroidered with delicate gold and silver thread. Her arms are bare, her costume held up by tight, spaghetti-thin straps that crisscross between her shoulder blades. Her hair is bound up in a bun, a sparkling tiara nestled neatly in her hair. And, *god*, her face, Mike could write pages about her face – pouty lips, set in a serene smile; glitter sparkling on rosy skin; eyes bright and shining and just *captivating*. He sees her and his heart feels like it's going to stop.

He sees her and he falls in love with her all over again.

And then Mike sees El *perform*

When he saw her practicing in the dance studio at school that one time, he was blown away by her ability. But this is a whole different beast. She's dancing with a partner (*Robert*, his brain reminds him, her friend and very married dance partner) and it allows her to be even more untethered from gravity's hold, as she balances and stretches and spins, all with his help.

Though part of Mike is maybe a little jealous of the fact that Robert gets to touch her like this, he's mostly in awe of the whole spectacle as the two dance across the stage. El is grace personified, beautiful

and serene, *otherworldly*, while Robert guides her and holds her and, *holy shit*, lifts her like she's made of air, carrying her across wide swaths of the stage without breaking a sweat.

Mike's almost envious at the easy way Robert handles and supports El, but he rationalizes that Robert's probably had *years* to build the strength and the skill required to do what he's doing on stage right now. The realization helps, but it still doesn't erase Mike's feelings of inadequacy.

(Seriously, why is she with him when she could be with someone like Robert? Someone who can lift her and carry her, someone with the strength and prowess that Mike has never had.)

But, then, it's just El on stage, by herself, dancing to one of the most recognizable classical music pieces in all of history. El's presence fills the entire stage, the entire auditorium. She's magnetic, irresistible, shining as bright as all the stars in the sky as she flies across the stage, all delicate grace and weightless beauty. Mike can see how El was considered one of the best ballet dancers in the *world* and he thanks all his lucky stars that she managed to find her way into his life so he could meet her, get to know her...fall in love with her.

Eventually, El's solo ends and the auditorium erupts in applause, the sound deafening as El bows and curtsies, smiling out at the audience. And, for a moment, Mike *sweats* she looks straight at him. His breath catches in his throat and it seems like her eyes maybe linger on him just a millisecond longer than normal before she continues gazing out at the rest of the audience. It's enough to make every inch of him warm with anticipation, his skin tingling as excitement practically oozes from every pore.

The rest of the ballet flies by in a blur. Mike's still paying attention, watching as Clara wakes from her dream and reunites with her family, but most of his attention is focused on El, on the minutes that count down until he can go backstage and see her close up.

By the time the ballet is over – the entire cast out on stage while the crowd showers them with applause, Mike among the, clapping his hands together so hard his palms sting – he's a jittery, excited mess. He practically bolts from his seat, scrambling to put on his coat,

which he's been holding in his lap for the entire show, and somehow manages not to run into anyone or step on anyone's toes or trip over his own two feet.

Once finally out in the lobby, Mike checks his jacket to see if the pass that'll let him backstage is still in his pocket. He's not at all ashamed at the sigh of relief he lets out when he sees the small slip sitting in his inside jacket pocket and he's smiling as he turns to find an usher.

The first usher he finds is a tiny Latina woman, maybe in her mid-20s, hair pulled up in a thick ponytail, as she quietly monitors the departing crowds. "Excuse me?" Mike says as he approaches. The woman looks up at him, polite smile on her face, eyes expectant, and Mike fumbles for the piece of paper in his jacket. "Um, the guy at Will Call told me to give this to one of the ushers after the show was over."

Mike hands the paper over and the woman looks at it, her smile widening once she looks back at him. "Of course, sir. This way, follow me."

Mike smiles. "Thanks," he says as he dutifully trails after her, making sure to not lose her in the crowd. Really, the last thing he needs is to be so close to seeing El...and having it all go horribly wrong. (Ok, logically, he knows he could just *call* her. But who knows if she has her phone on her or how long it'll take for her to get to her phone? It's not like she carries it around while she's in costume, or anything.)

A minute later, they come to a stop in front of a door marked "Employees Only" and the usher turns around, giving him another smile. "Wait right here. I'm going to go grab the house manager."

Mike nods, the only thing he can do, really, and settles in to wait. And he *waits*. Almost 5 minutes go by, his heartrate increasing with every passing minute, it feels like. His palms are a little clammy, his fingers shaking, and he's almost bouncing from excitement. *God, he just needs to see El. Right Now.*

Eventually, the door opens back up and the usher is accompanied by an older gentleman, a headset on his head attached to a walkie talkie of some kind. "Hi, sir," the usher says. "This is the house manager.

He'll see you backstage."

"Great, thanks," Mike says, making sure to look at both of them so as not to exclude anyone.

"Right this way," the house manager says, voice loud and booming, and he waves for Mike to follow him as they go in through the Employees Only door.

Mike's not sure what he was expecting to see backstage at a theater, but what he *does* see is a twisting, turning, cavernous maze of hallways and rooms, filled with strange equipment and people milling about. He immediately gets turned around and he's not sure there's any way he would ever figure out how to get around in this mess, even if he had the mental energy to pay attention (which he doesn't right at this moment – not when his entire being is consumed with El and how he's *so close* to seeing her again).

Eventually, the house manager leads Mike to what looks like a small lounge area, with a couple of couches and tables and chairs, but none of the details are particularly important.

Because, standing in front of a coffee table, only 15 feet away, is El.

And, suddenly, Mike can't breathe.

On stage, from where he sat, El was beautiful. But up close like this, where he can see the sweep of her cheekbones, the length of her lashes, the flush of her skin - where she's so close, it would take no effort at all to reach out and touch her? She's *radiant*. She's still completely in costume, even down to the tiara, looking somewhere off to the side with a gentle smile on her face. And Mike's never seen anyone more breathtakingly beautiful in his entire life.

Time slows to a crawl and Mike barely even notices the house manager walking away. People are moving around them, many of them in costume, chattering and laughing as they go about their lives. But they may as well not exist in this moment. Because he's too busy staring at El and trying to remember how to breathe.

What feels like minutes later, but is probably only a couple of

seconds, Mike manages to suck in a deep breath, pulling in enough air to speak, feeling weak and shaky with how overwhelmed he is. “El, hi.”

El startles a bit and she looks towards him, lips pulling up in a bright, excited smile that makes his heart squeeze painfully in his chest. “Mike,” she breathes, just loud enough for him to hear. Her eyes dart up and down his form, like she’s drinking him in and isn’t sure what exactly she wants to look at. But Mike absolutely does not miss the way her teeth pull in her lower lip to bite down gently on it and Mike holds back a groan. It just draws attention to her mouth and *holy shit* he really wants to kiss her. He wants to kiss her so bad, he can practically taste it and he doesn’t think he’s ever wanted anything more in his entire life.

Mike finds himself moving towards her, almost on autopilot, and notices that she’s doing the same, eliminating the distance between them until they’re only inches apart. His whole body buzzes with how close she is and he can’t stop staring at her. She’s beautiful and amazing and looking up at him with open invitation, like she wants him just as much as he wants her, and Mike knows he can’t wait any longer.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” he says, voice low and thick with desire. Mike didn’t intend to say the words out loud, but he no longer has control over what’s happening. That disappeared the second he realized she was here, waiting for him.

El sucks in a gasp, her lips parting (in shock or anticipation of being kissed, Mike’s not sure), and her gaze briefly drops down to his mouth. Her tongue flicks out to wet her lips and Mike can’t help but trace the movement of her tongue with his gaze, his whole body warming at the memory of the soft sweetness of her tongue brushing against his. “My face is covered in glitter,” she says, her voice pitching high with a breathlessness that sends shivers down his spine. Her words are nothing more than a token warning, spoken without true meaning, like she feels like she has to say something. But she’s starting to lean up towards him and all of his control breaks.

Mike reaches for her – he was even *before* her token warning – one hand going to her waist, fingers splayed against the small of her back,

the other sliding to cup the back of her neck, her skin warm and soft to the touch, the fine hairs at the edge of her hairline tickling the curve between his thumb and forefinger. “God, I really don’t care,” he whispers as he finishes pulling her towards him and leans over to capture her lips with his, kissing her like he’s been dying to do all day.

The sound that Mike makes when his mouth comes in contact with El’s is almost indecent – a low groan that resonates deep in his chest, a touch desperate and *a lot* satisfied. And he would be embarrassed if not for the soft whimper that escapes from El’s mouth in answer as she returns the kiss, rising up to press against him, her body soft where it curves against his.

Mike curls his fingers against her, digging into the flesh of her hip through her costume, holding her close to him, as need and desire slowly warm in his veins. With his other hand, he slowly caresses the skin on the side of her neck, feeling the smooth slide of it beneath his thumb. El shivers against him and Mike can’t help the way proud satisfaction swells inside of him that he can affect her like this, even as he finds himself completely and utterly consumed by her.

Kissing El Hopper is as close to heaven on Earth as Mike’s going to get, he figures. Her mouth is warm and soft, her lips sinfully sweet and deliciously tempting as they move against his, insistent and beseeching. Her hands come up to brace against him, one pressed just over his heart, the other high on his shoulder, her fingers teasing as they just barely dip beneath the collar of his shirt. And then she rises up onto her toes, still in her ballet shoes, leaning into him even harder until there’s no space between the two of them, her chest pushing against his with every breath and, *holy shit*, he was right. On her toes, El Hopper is at the *perfect* height, allowing him to kiss her just that much harder.

The mood takes a sharp turn and he sucks in a deep breath through his nose as his mouth slants even harder against hers, lips parting so his tongue can brush softly against her lips, imploring. She answers, responding in kind, and the jolt that runs through him when he feels her tongue against his resonates all the way down to his toes. He tightens his hold on her, sliding the hand that’s on the back of her neck down so he can press against the bare skin of her upper back.

His heart pounds fiercely in his chest, his lungs not big enough to draw in the amount of oxygen he needs to keep from panting breathlessly.

This kiss is a promise, a sneak peak of what awaits them – passion, all-consuming and overwhelming – and Mike wants to get lost in the future temptingly being woven for him, wants to get lost in the heat and desire that flows freely between them.

But now is not the time for that and, slowly and as one, the kiss between Mike and El draws to a close. They don't separate though – the thought is *unbearable* and it makes Mike wonder how he's going to weather being separated from her for 3 weeks. And it seems that El is having thoughts along the same line as she makes no move to put any distance between them.

So Mike just leans forward so his forehead is pressed against hers and breathes deep, pulling the scent of her into his lungs. He's trying to catch his breath, but it's so, so hard when he's this overwhelmed by her. El seems to be just as overwhelmed, her breath coming out in sharp, little pants, fanning against his lips and jaw with every puff of air.

This is what he needs, he realizes with a pang that resonates in every beat of his heart. Just her and her closeness, to feel her breath against his skin, to hold her in his arms, to have her pressed against him so tight that nothing could fit between them.

He knows, in this moment, that all he'll *ever* need for the rest of his life is *her*. And he knows – *god*, does he know – that this is all still so very new, that they're just getting started, that it's *way too early* for him to declare, even if only to himself, that he is irrevocably in love with her. But this truth echoes through him, as clear as a bell, filling in all his empty spaces and weaving into the very fabric of his soul. It's a truth he knows as surely as he knows the Earth is round or the sun rises in the east.

Mike doesn't say anything, though. It really is *way* too soon to be confessing the depth of his feelings. So, he just stands there and luxuriates in being close to her, in being able to hold her. But there is no denying how he feels.

There is no denying that Mike Wheeler is totally, completely, 100% in love with El Hopper.

And, for now, it's enough.

Kissing Mike is like coming home and going off the drop of the world's tallest rollercoaster, all at the same time.

It sounds almost trite, but there's no other way to describe the way El's heart pounds in her chest, her breath racing to keep up with the beat of her heart, every inch of her skin tingling, while the deepest, most sublime calm settles low in her belly and brushes against her heart with soft, gossamer wings, warming her from within.

It's in this moment, reconnecting with him, that El realizes there is never going to be any untangling Mike Wheeler from her heart and soul, that he's become such a fundamental part of who she is.

Guess it's a good thing that she never wants to try.

She's been something of a mess all day, anxious excitement a constant backdrop to every moment. Since waking up that morning, her thoughts have raced with the knowledge that, once her last performance is over, she'll be able to see him and touch him and kiss him. God, he's lucky she was able to focus on performing with just how distracted and head-in-the-clouds she's felt all day.

But Mike's here, now. *Oh god*, is he here.

Her heart races from the moment she hears Mike's voice in the green room, where she's waiting for him to appear. And when she looks at him, she can't help but drink in the sight of him, taking in the dark blue button down that looks so, *so good* against his skin, the top button undone to reveal the hollow between his collarbones, paired with the fitted slacks that hang just right off his hips, emphasizing the lean length of his legs. God, he looks good enough to eat and El can't help the way her blood warms with barely suppressed desire.

But what *really* takes her breath away is the way he's looking at her, like she's all he ever wants or needs, like he's in awe and she can't help but go to him, not when he's looking at her like she is *everything*.

When he tells her he's going to kiss her, her heart leaps into her throat. And when he finally does, she swears she's going to float away and dissolve into pure sensation.

Mike's lips on hers are the sweetest drug she's ever known and she'll never, *ever* get enough. And his hands – *god*, his hands – he holds her so gently, his touch pure fire against her skin, even through the fabric of her costume. She wants to feel him *everywhere*, wants to surrender completely to the promise of his touch, warm and thrilling, but still so, so safe, like he'll never let her fall, never let her get hurt.

El hates that they have to stop kissing, but she recognizes where they are and so, when the kiss draws to a close, she doesn't fight it.

They stand there for a few, long moments, foreheads pressed against each other's as she leans against him, still en pointe, with only the sounds of their harsh breathing between them. But, eventually, El opens her eyes and looks up at him, needing to let her eyes drink their fill. "Hi," she breathes, lips that are still tingling from their kisses curving with a lovesick grin.

Mike opens his eyes and El has to swallow the whimpering moan that threatens to burst free at the look in his eyes: pupils dilated, gaze dark and hungry, but sparkling with happiness, all at the same time. He looks at her like he can't believe she's real, no one else can ever compare and El can't believe how lucky she is, that this amazing, wonderful man looks at her like she holds the world in the palm of her hands. "Hi," he returns, just as softly, pulling back just enough so he can look at her.

"You're here," she says, almost incredulous. She's been dreaming of this *all day* and it's finally here – *he's* finally here.

"I'm here," he echoes, his fingers against her upper back, drawing slight, gentle patterns against her bare skin that make her shiver, goosebumps breaking out on her skin.

El sighs, happy and content, and her smile broadens as she looks at his face. “You have glitter on you, now.”

Mike breathes out a laugh, shaking his head just slightly. “It’s just glitter. Besides, totally worth it,” he says, a grin on his own stretching those beautiful, sinful lips. *God, she wants to kiss him again.*

“So secure in your masculinity. You have enough street cred to hold up to a little glitter, huh?” El teases.

Mike rolls his eyes, but he’s still smiling. “Right, street cred. Because I’m so tough. I didn’t tell any of my friends I was coming to the ballet tonight because I didn’t want them to give me shit.”

El giggles. “Well, I’m sure if you just explained it was because of a woman, they’d understand. I mean, they’d still probably give you shit, but they’d recognize the sacrifice you were making.”

“Sacrifice, right,” Mike says with a snort.

“C’mon,” El says as she reluctantly pulls away, reaching down to grab the hand that’s pressed against the small of her back. “I need to change and then we need to go have that celebration dinner.”

Mike shifts the hand in her grip so he can weave their fingers together. “Lead on, Ms. Hopper,” he says with a wink that makes El’s knees feel weak.

“So,” El asks as she leads him towards her dressing room, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. “Did you like the show?”

To El’s surprised pleasure, Mike nod, smiling over at her sincerely. “It was amazing,” he says, sounding almost surprised by the strength of his feelings. “And you were *incredible*. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more astounding in my entire life.”

El feels her cheeks heat up with a pleased, yet embarrassed blush. “Yeah?”

Mike levels a look at her as she leads him around a corner. “Please, you know how good you are. You *have* to know.” He sighs, shaking his head a bit. “I just can’t believe you gave it all up for this. You’re

just so fucking talented.”

El shrugs, knowing that she can’t deny that she’s talented – she wouldn’t have made it as far in her career as she did if she wasn’t. But, still, it’s flattering that he thinks so. “It’s a hard life, performing professionally,” she says as they approach her dressing room. “Very regimented and a lot of pressure. I had to be careful about what I ate and what I did and I was away from home more often than not – I think I traveled about 75% of the time. I just got tired after a while.”

They stop in front of her dressing room door and El turns to look up at Mike, shrugging a shoulder in what she hopes is a coy move. “Besides, if I hadn’t stopped, I would never have moved here and I wouldn’t have met you, so....” She reaches up and pulls Mike in for a brief kiss, her lips lingering on his for a moment before she pulls away, feeling Mike lean in just a bit, chasing her lips with his like magnets are pulling him forward. “I think I made the right move.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not complaining,” he says. “Just amazed at my good luck.”

El lets out a snort that is not exactly ladylike, but she’s having too much fun to care. “Please, you say that like you’re not something special, Mike Wheeler. You are amazing and don’t you forget it,” she says, reaching up to tap the tip of his nose with her index finger, grinning at how his face scrunches, all amused and incredulous at the same time. “Now, I’m going to change out of this costume so we can go out to dinner – it’s been a long day and I’m starving.”

Mike grins, eyes twinkling with amusement. “Need any help?” he says, eyebrows waggling a bit.

El knows he’s teasing, the words spoken in jest, but she decides to respond to them in a *different* kind of teasing manner. So, she winks at him as she takes a step back, keeping her eyes on him as she turns towards her door. “Maybe next time,” she says over her shoulder, her voice pitching low, the words breathy, and she has to hold in her laughter at the gob-smacked look that takes over Mike’s face – mouth dropping open, eyes widening, cheeks flushing. “Be out in a few minutes.”

El slips inside her dressing room and it's only once the door's shut behind her that she lets out the giggles she's been holding in for the past few moments, leaning against the door as she lets her happiness overtake her. She's so happy, it almost hurts – her heart pounds in her chest, her smile feels almost too wide, and her skin feels way too tight. But she doesn't care. Not when she gets to kiss Mike Wheeler and have him kiss her back like she's the most important woman in the universe.

With a sigh that sounds more like it belongs coming from a teenage girl than a full-grown woman – all high pitched and cooing and just so damn lovesick, it *should* be nauseating – El pushes away from the door so she can hurry to get out of costume...and get ready to spend the rest of the evening with Mike.

Getting out of her costume is routine now – place the tiara on her dressing room table, take off her ballet shoes and tend to her feet, slip off the leotard and tutu and hang them on the metal rack by the door, remove her tights – and, for a moment, El just stands there in only a pair of underwear and sighs at the relief of being out of costume.

But, on the very next breath, El becomes suddenly and keenly aware that she's mostly naked and Mike's just on the other side of the door. She sucks in a sharp breath as she bites down on her lower lip. How easy would it be to invite him in, to pull him in here and discover just how it feels to have him touch her *everywhere*?

El shivers at the thought, bombarded with the mental images that thought sparks in her mind, and she gives herself a quick shake to get herself under control.

There will be no seducing of anyone in your dressing room, she chides herself. *No matter how much you might want to right now.*

Determined to get back to Mike, El cleans up a bit, mainly using a face wipe to clear the bulk of her makeup from her face and running her hair under the sink in the bathroom to try and remove as much of the hairspray as possible. Once she's towed off and as clean as she's going to get without a shower, El tosses her hair back up in a bun, albeit a much messier one, and dresses quickly in thick leggings, a

cream colored sweater with a low V-neck, and a pair of black boots that keep her feet warm as well as look cute with her outfit.

Finally, bundled up in her coat with her duffle bag thrown over her shoulder, El exits her dressing room-

-Only to find Robert all but cornering Mike in the hallway. There's a bit of mild panic on Mike's face as he listens to Robert talk about... *something*, El's not sure (it's hard to think when Mike's *right here*, so close she can reach out and touch him), but it doesn't seem *dire*, like there's about to be a throwdown or anything.

It helps, El supposes, that Mike looks over when she opens the door and the look on his face, all awe and relief and excitement rolled into one, makes her heart skip madly in her chest.

"El, there you are! You abandoned your boy, here," Robert says, voice a tad too bright and chipper for El's liking.

El looks over at him and gives him a flat look in return for the way he's grinning at her. "Oh, and I'm sure you're just being helpful, eh? What horrible things are you telling him, Robert?"

Robert adopts a wide-eyed, innocent look that is very unbecoming for a man his age (which is only a couple of years older than her) and it makes El roll her eyes. "Who, me? Would I do such a thing?"

El, remembering the earlier conversation she had with Robert about him putting the "fear of God" into Mike, just sighs. "Yes, yes you would," she says, crossing her arms over her chest.

"We were just talking about our jobs," Mike says. "Nothing controversial, or anything."

Robert's grin just widens. "See? I'm totally harmless."

"Uh-huh," El says, arching an eyebrow skeptically. "Well, you should probably be getting home to Sandy, yeah?" she says as she moves to stand by Mike, not-so-subtly hooking her arm around his.

"Oh, I see how this goes," Robert says. "I'll leave you two to your evening. See you bright and early tomorrow, El." With a teasing

wink, Robert brushes past them, leaving Mike and El alone in the hallway.

“He seems nice,” Mike says, looking down at El.

“He is,” El says, grinning. “Just a little....” She trails off, considering. “Meddlesome. He doesn’t seem to remember that I already have two brothers.” El giggles, shaking her head. “Anyway, enough about Robert. Where are we going for dinner?”

At that, Mike smiles. “There’s this great upscale diner not too far from where we both live. It’s nice and casual and, at this time of the night, pretty empty.”

“Post dinner, pre-late night slump?” El asks.

“Pretty much. All the dinner people have gone home and the people who go out drinking aren’t drunk enough yet to want upscale comfort food,” Mike says as they start walking, still arm-in-arm. “I drove here, so I figured I’d drive us to dinner and then drive you home, if that’s ok.”

Happiness flutters like hummingbird wings in her chest and El grins up at him, unable to believe *any* of this is happening. “That’s perfect,” she sighs. She took Lyft to get here today, selfishly hoping that Mike would drive so he could drive her home. But, even though she *hoped* this would happen, she’s still blown away by him. God, she could just kiss him for how sweet he is.

Well, then, why don’t you? her brain whispers.

So El stops them in the middle of the hallway, forcing Mike to turn to look down at her, his face shrouded with a look on concerned confusion. “Everything ok?”

El smiles, feeling coquettish as she all but bats her eyelashes up at him. “Just realizing it’s been almost 10 minutes since I kissed you.”

A slow grin spreads over Mike’s face, his cheeks flushing, as his confusion turns to happy excitement. “You should probably fix that.”

El nods, trying to pretend to be serious. “You’re right, I should,” she

says as she reaches up to gently curl her fingers in the fabric of his dress shirt before she pulls him towards her, rising up on her toes so she can bring his lips down to hers.

Mike meets her halfway, his mouth hot and eager against hers. One of his hands comes up to cradle her cheek, his thumb gently caressing her cheekbone, his palm warm against the skin of her face, and his fingers curl around the edge of her jaw so that his fingertips to rest oh so gently against the side of her neck. El whimpers and throws herself even more into the kiss, letting her mouth slant hard against his as she curves her body in an attempt to get as close to him as possible. She finds herself swept away by the softness of his lips, the way they move against hers, teasing and insistent and all-consuming.

God, she could just do this forever.

But she can't and she knows it.

So, with a sigh, El slowly ends the kiss, pulling away just enough to look up at him, breath hitching at the soft heat in his gaze. "You're a really good kisser, you know that?" she says, wishing she didn't sound so breathless and wanting.

"Right back atcha," Mike says, his own voice sending shivers down her spine with how *rough* it is, like he's barely holding himself back.

Heaving a sigh, El lowers herself back down to her feet. "We should probably get to dinner, huh?"

"Probably a good idea," Mike says, letting out a wistful breath that El feels deep down in her soul.

"C'mon," she says as she starts them moving down the hallway once more. "You promised me food."

Mike grins, laughing a bit. "This is true. And don't let it be said that I don't keep my promises."

El looks at him out of the corner of her eye as they move from backstage out to the front of the house. "Hmm, we'll see. Depends on how good this restaurant is, Wheeler."

Mike arches an eyebrow – *challenge accepted.* “Oh, you’ll see, Hopper. You’ll see.”

Turns out, the restaurant Mike takes them to is actually really cute and eclectic. Dark, painted walls, decorated with artwork from local artists, dimly lit with low, exposed lighting, low tables surrounded by booths tucked against the wall. Only about a third of the tables are occupied and Mike manages to convince the hostess to give them a corner booth (not that it takes much convincing – the restaurant’s not even half filled).

This is how El finds herself snuggled up in a corner booth with Mike, with shared plates of food spread out on the table in front of them – macaroni and cheese made with four different kinds of cheese, tater tots tossed in truffle oil, rosemary fried chicken and waffle (god, she’s having the best worst food day – first brunch with Will and now this).

They’re mostly picking at their food, though, with as focused as they are on *each other*. They’re facing one another as they sit pressed up against each other in the booth, talking about nothing in particular and occasionally feeding each other bites of food. Mike has the leg closest to her folded up between them while he sits with his elbow propped up on the seatback of the booth, his hand holding up his head. El, meanwhile, sits with her shoulder cradled against the curve of the booth with one leg curled up in front of her, the other hooked over Mike’s folded-up knee to keep her as close to him as possible, given that they’re in public.

(*el knows it's possible to get much, much closer and the thought of that makes her warm from the inside in a way that almost robs her of the ability to breathe.*)

Still, she’s close enough to Mike that kissing him is as easy as breathing. She just has to lean in slightly to close the maybe 12 inches that separate him – which she does with a frequency that would be embarrassing if Mike didn’t return the favor just as often. The kisses they share during dinner different than the ones they

shared at the theater: soft, lingering kisses that are way gentler than at the theater, but just as thrilling. El's heart skips a beat or two every time her lips meet with his and she wonders, *hopes* that this will never change. She wants every time they kiss to feel a little bit like the first time: exhilarating and surprising, resonating all the way down to her toes.

"So," El says about 10 minutes after the server dropped off their food, popping a tater tot into her mouth. "You really had a good time tonight?"

Mike nods and reaches out with the hand by his head to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, one that's fallen out from the loose bun she has it in, her hair still slightly damp. El shivers at the feel of Mike's fingertips brushing against the shell of her ear and she can't help the way she sighs a little in response. "Yeah, I had a great time," Mike says, smile soft and sincere. "The ballet's a lot cooler than I thought."

El breathes a sigh of relief. "Good, I'm glad you think so. Ballet's such a big part of who I am that it would be a shame if you didn't like it at all."

"Well, if it's part of you, how could I *not* like it," Mike says, his smile morphing into a teasing grin as he leans in just a fraction.

El finds herself mirroring him, leaning in until there's only a handful of inches separating their faces. "So you like me, huh? What do you like about me?"

Mike breathes out a laugh, shaking his head just a little. "Fishing for compliments, much?"

El reaches out and presses her hand against Mike's chest to the sound of his sharp gasp, her thumb and forefinger plucking at one of the buttons of his shirt while the rest of her fingers gently curl into the fabric of his shirt. "Is it fishing if *you* brought it up in the first place?" she asks as she looks up at him, smiling softly, feeling her cheeks warm with emotion.

"I guess not," Mike says, his gaze dancing across her face. "God, you are so beautiful," he says, breathing out the words, sounding so in

awe, it makes El feel light headed.

"I'm a mess right now. I've been performing all day and I'm not even wearing makeup," El says, her flush deepening at the compliment.

"Doesn't matter. You're always beautiful," Mike says, the hand not propping up his head reaching out to lightly cup her cheek. El shivers as the heat of his palm comes in contact with her skin. And when his thumb gently caresses her cheekbone while his fingers slide into her hair right beneath her bun, El can't help but gasp, reveling in the way his fingertips lightly scrape against her scalp.

God, she needs to kiss him. Right now.

But, before she can, *he* does, leaning in to capture her lips in a kiss so intense, it feels like it sets her on fire. El sucks in a sharp breath through her nose as she kisses him back, opening her mouth beneath the onslaught of his, their tongues brushing against each other's with feathery caresses that make every inch of her skin tingle. El tightens her grip on his shirt, the material bunching in her fist, and she leans in to him further so that his forearm presses firmly against her shoulder, the warmth of him bleeding through her sweater as she gets lost in him.

El's so very aware that she and Mike are being *that couple*, the one who is obnoxiously affectionate in public, but she doesn't care. Not when he kisses her so sweetly or holds her so gently or makes her feel like the most desirable women on the face of the planet.

Slowly, *so slowly*, the kiss draws to a close, but neither of them make a move to pull away, relishing in each other's closeness. Mike's breath fans against her face, warm and gentle, his lips just barely *not* touching hers, and El struggles to rein in her racing heart. He's so close and yet, not close enough – *never* close enough. And she's so very aware, in this moment, that this is the last time she's going to see him for three weeks and it *hurts*, the thought of being separated from him for that long.

El knows that, in the grand scheme of things, three weeks really isn't that long, that she's a grown woman and is, or should be, mature enough to weather the time apart. But it still *sucks*, no matter how

she slices it. This is still so new, they *just* got together, and all she wants to do is spend every waking moment with him, where he can make her feel like he does right now.

El pulls back just enough so she can look at Mike and she almost sighs longingly at the sight of him. He's just so *pretty*, even though he would probably hate being called that. But how else to describe the high sweep of his cheekbones, or the dark warmth of his eyes, or the full sweetness of his lips, set off by the strong lines of his jaw? How else to describe the pattern of his freckles across the milky smoothness of his skin, the way his lips curve as he smiles or grins?

"Whatcha staring at?" Mike asks with a voice that is low and raspy in the way that El really likes, which makes her imagine what it would be like to wake up next to him and hear his voice clouded with lingering sleep.

El sighs and smiles. "I just like looking at you," she says, voice just above a whisper. "I could look at you all day and never get bored, I think."

Mike huffs out a quiet laugh, an embarrassed flush crawling up his cheeks. "Flatterer."

"Truth-teller, you mean," El says, reaching up to cup his cheek, her fingers splayed across his jaw, thumb tapping gently against his chin. She leans in for a quick kiss, marveling once again at the way her heart skips a beat, before she pulls away and takes a bite off food, a forkful of mac and cheese. "So," she says after chewing a bit. "What do you have planned for the holidays at home?"

Mike reaches for his drink, a beer that's only half full, and rolls his eyes. "Managing around the elephant in the room that is my parents' failed marriage while trying not to bash my head against the wall. Maybe my sisters and I will do something fun to compensate, I don't know. My youngest sister is a freshman in college, which rules out drinking to relieve the stress, but we'll figure something out, I suppose."

El cringes a bit. "Hmm, sounds like fun," she says, grinning wryly. "I'll take being roped into planning the Christmas pageant, thank

you.”

“Is that why you’re going home early?”

“Yeah,” El says. “My high school dance club teacher operates this dance studio for kids in town and she always needs extra help preparing for the Christmas Pageant. Mostly just getting costumes together, helping plan the order of the acts, and leading dress rehearsals. It’s not glamorous, but I think the kids listen to me more because their dance teacher hypes me up.”

Mike grins. “Well, you’re a prima ballerina, so, *naturally*, they’re going to be enchanted. I mean, I know, I am.”

El levels a look at him. “Not because I used to be a professional ballet dancer, you’re not.”

“Well, no,” Mike says, quirking an eyebrow, head tilting in concession of her point. “But I won’t deny that it’s awesome.”

El just lets out a laugh before she moves on. “Anyway, besides that, I think I’m just going to hang out with my family. Christmas is usually pretty chill and I think this year, it’s just immediate family only.”

Mike smiles. “That sounds nice. Are you and your brother carpooling back together?”

El shakes her head, trying to remember Will’s plans. “No, he and his partner are coming later in the week, maybe a couple of days before Christmas Eve? I’m not sure exactly when, but a few days after me, for sure.”

“Well, I’m sure your Christmas will be better than mine. At least from the awkward family angle,” Mike says, grinning dryly.

“Hmm, I bet,” El says. “Except for the fact that I’m *really* going to miss you.”

Mike breathes out a humorless laugh. “Our timing’s really something, isn’t it? Managing to figure this out” – he gestures to the space between them – “just in time to go home for three weeks.”

El takes his hand in hers, weaving their fingers together. “I won’t lie, it’s going to suck. But we’ll talk on the phone, yeah?”

Mike nods, squeezing her hand in his. “Yeah, every day,” he says. “You’re not getting rid of me *that* easily.”

“Good, I’m counting on it,” El says, giggling a bit.

The rest of dinner flows naturally from that point, Mike asking her questions about the ballet, El asking him how his writing is going, both of them talking about the things they want to do when they both get back to Chicago, especially the things they want to do *together*. The time just flies by and, before El is ready, Mike’s walking her back to his car so he can drive her home, the two of them bundled up against the cold, Chicago night.

Mike unlocks his car and rushes ahead a couple of steps to open the passenger door for her. “What a gentleman,” El says with a giggle.

Mike smiles down at her, winking under the light of the nearby streetlamp. “Always,” he responds, waiting for her to get in the car so he can shut the door behind her and race around to the other side to slide in behind the wheel.

Mike’s car is a lot nicer than hers, all leather interior and sleek trim. But what she *really* loves is the heated seats, which kick in mere seconds after Mike starts the ignition and El almost lets out a moan as the heat from the seat soaks in through the fabric of her leggings.

“I love these seats,” El says. “I *so* need a car with heated seats.”

Mike flashes her a smile as he drives with care down the cold, icy streets. “Hey, you can ride in my car whenever you want, if you want access to heated seats.”

“You just want me to spend more time with you,” El says. She arches an eyebrow to emphasize her point, her lips curling into a teasing grin.

“Damn, you caught me out,” Mike says with a chuckle, smile belying his words.

"Didn't say it was a *bad* thing," El says, giggling around the words. Unable to stop herself, El reaches out and slides her fingers first across the top of Mike's right hand before curling around so she can fold his hand in hers, pressing their palms together. Mike lets go of the steering wheel and lets El rest their clasped hands on the center console as he drives.

It's not a long ride to El's house and it passes in comfortable silence, El only speaking up to tell Mike where to turn to get to her house. El spends the time focused on how well her hand fits against Mike's, his palm warm against hers, his fingers gentle where they curve around her hand while his thumb softly caresses the skin between the first and second knuckle of her index finger. It's soft and intimate and just as calming as it is thrilling.

El never wants Mike to let go.

But, El knows he has to once he parks in front of her house, just behind her car. "Wow," Mike says as he leans forward just enough to look at her house through the windshield. "You're only a few blocks away from where I am. Like, I could *walk* home if I wanted to." He pauses, chuffing out a short laugh. "I mean, I *won't* because it's a frozen hellscape outside, but still...."

El hears the words Mike's saying, but she really doesn't care right in this moment. Because she's looking over at him, heart aching with the realization that, once she leaves this car and goes inside, it'll be *three weeks* until she sees him again. She finds herself trying to memorize the way he looks right now, shrouded in the dim light of the distant streetlamp that bleeds through the windows, casting shadows across his face that make him look intriguingly mysterious, which only makes him look even more handsome than he already is.

Her heart leaps into her throat, causing her breath to hitch in her chest. She desperately drinks in the sight of him, gaze tracing over the sweep of his eyelashes, the lines of his cheekbones, the angle of his jaw, the fullness of his lips. She lets her gaze travel further, down the length of his arm to where he's gripping the steering wheel, long fingers wrapped loosely around the wheel while his thumbs lazily tap a beat against the stitched leather.

El swears she's never seen anyone more beautiful than he is in this very moment.

And she's *never* wanted anyone more in her entire life.

El knows this is her body's response to the anxiety of being separated from Mike, but as her skin warms, her veins filling with tingling heat, El doesn't care.

Not when it's just her and Mike in the car. Not when they're *alone*.

Not when it feels *this good*.

Licking her lips, El sucks in a tremulous breath. "Mike?" Her voice sounds too breathy, too full of want...too *desperate* and El would have cringed if she weren't so overwhelmed by the feelings coursing through her, all heart-pounding anticipation and breathless want.

Mike turns to look at her at the sound of her voice, leaning a bit towards her. The confused expression on his face is so adorable, it only makes her want him *more*. "Yeah, El?" His gaze on her is warm and soft, concerned and curious, and El finds herself leaning towards him in return, needing to be closer.

"Kiss me?"

For a moment, a heavy, heady stillness blankets over the both of them. Mike breathes in a quiet gasp, his eyes widening just a bit as he looks down at her. El feels like there's not enough oxygen in the car as she looks up at him, her chest heaving as she tries to catch her breath, her heart pounding wildly in her chest.

Slowly – almost *too* slowly – Mike brings a hand to her face, cupping her cheek, his thumb pressing right below her cheekbone. El can't help the way she gasps, the sound trailing off in a quiet whimper, as his thumb traces the curve of her cheek, the caress sparking a cascade of fireworks all across her skin, warming her from within, the heat pooling heavy in her veins. Need like she's never experienced before invades her every nerve and El is helpless against it.

She knows she needs to be rational about this; she has an early day tomorrow and she really needs to go to sleep. But this is her last

chance to be with Mike for *days* and that thought overrides everything.

And then Mike leans in the rest of the way, his mouth capturing hers in a kiss that is soft and reverent, a kiss that warms her entire soul from the inside out...

...a kiss that is just *not enough* for what El needs right in this very moment.

El tilts her head up so she can kiss him back, kiss him *harder*, as she reaches out to pull him closer, her hands sliding inside the open ends of his jacket so she can grab him by the shirt, the material bunching in her fists.

Mike lets out a sudden groan, the sound resonating deep inside of her, before he returns the fervor of her kisses, his mouth hot and hard against hers. The hand on her cheek slides up so that Mike can slide his fingers into her hair as best he can with her hair up in its bun. Wanting to have his fingers completely woven in her hair, El reaches up and, with a flick of her wrist, pulls out the hair tie holding her hair up. The elastic band falls somewhere on the seat behind El, but she doesn't really care as her hair falls down her back and Mike's hand moves so that he's cupping the back of her head, his fingers scraping against her scalp as he winds them in her hair.

El returns the favor, moving her hands to his hair, letting the dark locks slide smoothly between her fingers as she holds him close to her, her mouth moving against his with deep, soul-searing kisses.

And then Mike breaks the kiss, his mouth moving away from hers to press against the skin of her jaw, her neck, the space right beneath her ear, his lips pulling and tugging while his tongue lightly caresses her skin. Every fiber of her being explodes into pure sensation, her skin feeling hot and tight, nerve endings crawling and sparking with desire. El lets out a moan that sounds just *indecent*, all breathy and high-pitched and *needy*.

But all she can think, right in this moment, with his hand in her hair and his mouth on her neck, is *more* and *closer*.

And so, before El can think too hard about what she's doing, she removes one of her hands from Mike's hair so she can reach down and unbuckle her seatbelt. Freed, she *moves*, clambering over the center console and taking advantage of her strength and flexibility to slide into his lap, her knees pressed against the outside of his thighs as her weight rests against him. Both of them moan at the move, suddenly so, so close to each other. The hand in her hair tightens its grip while Mike brings his other hand to her hip to hold her close, the tips of his fingers dipping beneath the hem of her sweater, his touch hot and thrilling through the tight fabric of her leggings.

El kisses him again, his whole body warm where it's pressed against hers. The heat of him bleeds through her clothes, warming her from within, his body firm where hers is soft, his arms around her strong and sure. The touch of his mouth and hands is a siren's song of pleasure and sensation, beckoning her, encouraging her to fall and never get up.

So, El falls.

And she *never* wants to get back up.

Mike's not 100% sure he's not dreaming. Because he's dreamed about this *so many times*.

El's hands are in his hair, her body pressed against his, her mouth moving with sinful sweetness against his, all teasing lips and beckoning tongue. The sounds she makes, a symphony of moans and whimpers, send shivers down his spine and boil his blood and he wants *nothing* more but make her make those noises for the rest of his life. She moves against him, all lithe and limber and *relentless*, her body soft and warm against his and oh so tempting.

Yeah, Mike's not sure that he's not really dreaming. But, regardless, he's not going to let this opportunity pass him by, not when he can kiss her and touch her the way he's wanted to for *months*.

For a second, he's not sure what to do with his hands other than what he's currently doing, one hand in her hair, strands fisted between his fingers, and the other wrapped around her hip through the thin fabric of her leggings. It's just so hard to think with the way El's kissing him right now, lips parted and slanting hard against his.

But then El's hands leave his hair and he hears the rustling of fabric just in time to feel her mouth leave his to press against the corner of his jaw. Moaning at the feel of her lips on his skin, Mike opens his eyes to see El shucking off her jacket before tossing it over on the now empty passenger seat.

He closes his eyes again as El trails hot kisses up his jaw and Mike tips his head back to give her access to the underside of his jaw, her mouth sucking lightly on the corner, right beneath his ear. He can't help the way he shifts against her in response to the pressure of her mouth, the hand on her hip holding her tight against him, making El moan and the sound vibrates against his skin in a way that is just *hedonistic*.

El pulls her mouth away from her skin and Mike feels her breath against his ear. He shivers at the sensation and tightens his grip in her hair. God, he never wants her to be any further away than she is *right now*.

"Touch me," El whispers, the words dripping with imploring need.
"Please."

Fuck.

It's like El's words are a magic spell, compelling him to act. The hand in her hair joins the hand at her waist, his fingers trailing down the length of her spine through her sweater. He grips her hips in both hands, gently squeezing the curves nestled against his palms, before he slowly slides his hands up, his fingers dipping beneath the hem of her sweater.

El pulls back enough to look down at him, gaze locked onto his. Mike stares back, unwilling to look away, as his hands slide up to press against the smooth skin of her waist, both of them moaning as his palms come in contact with her bare skin. Her skin is even softer than

he could imagine, warm and smooth as silk, and he very much wants to see if she feels like this *everywhere*. He caresses her stomach with his thumbs, the rest of his fingers splayed against the curves between her waist and ribcage, and grits his teeth against the heat that rolls through him as she lets out a whimpering moan, back arching just enough so her head tips back, her face going slack with pleasure.

Holy shit, he wants her. He wants to see what she looks like as she gets lost in the way he touches her, wants to know what it feels like to be pressed skin to skin, wants to know how it feels to lay with her, limbs tangled, unable to tell where he ends and she begins.

He wants her more than he's ever wanted *anyone* in his entire life.

And he gets to be with her like this. *Him*, Mike Wheeler, King of the Nerds, gets to touch the most beautiful woman he's ever met, gets to hear her moan and cry out, gets to kiss her and love her and *be* with her.

How on Earth did he get so lucky?

Spurred on, Mike pushes his hands higher up El's sweater, mapping out the feel and shape of the soft curves beneath his palms, all to the sounds of her soft cries and high-pitched moans, her body arching against his as she presses herself into his touch. He explores every inch of her torso, learning how to touch her – what she likes, what makes her shiver or cry out or press herself harder against him.

But then El shifts forward, hips flexing, until they're pressed firmly together from the ribcage down, her hips rolling as she moves against him and – *holy shit, yes*.

Heat, unbearable and over-powering, surges through him and Mike finds himself moving against her in return, their bodies shifting against each other's in the tight confines of the front seat of his car. It's thrilling and erotic...

...and Mike needs *more*.

He moves one hand down so that it's pressed against the small of her back, angling her hips *just so* against his. "Invite me inside," he says,

his voice low and rough, ragged with pleasure and need.

El lets out a whimper as her fingers pluck at the buttons of his shirt, the heat of her palms a firebrand through the fabric. “I can’t,” she whines, the words trailing off in a gasp as he pushes up against her.

Mike can feel them racing headlong for the point of no return and if they don’t want to finish this in the car, they need to relocate. *Soon.* “El, please,” he says, all but begging. The feel of her against him is driving him out of his mind, making him lose all sense of shame.

“I have an early morning and I need sleep,” El says, chest heaving against his hand. “And if I invite you inside....” She pauses, dipping her head to pull his earlobe in between her teeth, suckling a bit on the flesh; Mike almost *cries* at the feel of her mouth on the sensitive flesh of his ear. “There will be *no sleeping*.” Mike just about loses it at the suggestion in her voice, his mind racing ahead of him with images of what “no sleeping” would entail. She releases his earlobe to kiss the corner of his jaw. “Besides,” she says, another kiss closer to his mouth. “Getting to 3rd base in the front seat of a car is just so much fun.”

Mike laughs through the moan that bubbles up inside of his chest. “I wouldn’t know,” he says.

El pulls back enough so she can kiss him properly, her lips full and supplicating. “Well, you’re about to find out,” she says, voice hushed, before she kisses him again, her hands sliding up to cup the sides of his neck, his ears resting neatly in the curves between her thumbs and forefingers, her fingertips sliding into the short hairs at the bottom of his hairline.

Mike surrenders himself fully to the way El moves against him, letting her siren song ensnare all his senses.

They lose themselves in each other in the front seat of his car, windows fogged up, the chill of the night kept out by the heat of their bodies.

(his hands under her sweater, underwire digging into the backs of his hands as he fills his palms with the soft shape of her, teasing fingers and

confident caresses. the heat of her thighs pressed against his hips, gripping him tight. the sounds of their moans and cries muffled by each other's lips as they move against each other, bodies shifting and arching, insistent and relentless. he watches as she falls apart in his arms, crying out as she crests and breaks against him, her whole body going taut as she arches beneath his hands. he follows her moments later, pulled along by the sight of her undoing - beautiful and open, completely without shame or censor - heat rushing through him, heart pounding, gripping her tight.)

After, they sit, nestled up against each other, her still straddling his thighs, his hands moving to rest gently on the bare skin of her back, fingers splayed against her ribcage. Their breaths come in harsh pants as they both struggle to find their way back to calm. The sweet sting of spent pleasure burns in Mike's veins and he sighs, happy and content for the moment, all the while marveling at the woman in his arms – this amazing, beautiful, *enchanting* woman. Mike feels like he's received a gift he can never, *ever* pay back – being able to touch her and love her like this, being able to watch her lose herself in pure sensation, being able to *make* her do that – and his heart clenches tight in his chest, overwhelmed by how this is his life now.

El lets out a soft giggle and leans forward to brush her nose against his in a light Eskimo kiss. “Hi,” she breathes.

Mike laughs, feeling so in love in this very moment, his heart feels like it’s going to burst. “Hi,” he returns. “So, that was fun.”

El giggles again, louder this time, and she slides one hand from the back of his neck so she can cup the side of his jaw, her thumb dragging lightly against the skin just beneath his mouth. “That’s putting it mildly,” she says. “Next time, maybe we’ll try it *without* clothes.”

Next time, holy shit. Mike grins, feeling like a fool, caught up in the emotions swirling around inside of him. “Hey, that’s what I wanted this time, but *someone* had other ideas,” he says, winking at her.

“Didn’t really hear you *complaining*,” El says with a coy shrug, returning his grin.

Mike arches an eyebrow. “Are you kidding? Please, like I would

complain about what just happened. I'm not *stupid*, you know.”

“Never said you were,” El says. “Just stating a fact.”

“Uh-huh, sure,” Mike drawls. “Likely story.”

A silence falls between them, the two of them just luxuriating in the other’s presence, neither of them wanting to move. Mike knows that the moment he walks her to her door, it’ll be the last he sees of her for a few weeks. So the longer he can put it off, the better.

El must be thinking something along the same lines because she sighs a moment later. “We’re delaying the inevitable, aren’t we?”

Mike nods, sighing as well. “Yeah, we are. I don’t want you to go, though.”

“I don’t want to, either,” El says. “But, it is what it is, I guess.”

Mike flinches at the sting of the truth in El’s words. “C’mom. I’ll walk you to your door.”

El smiles, wistfulness fading for a moment. “Will you kiss me good night like a gentleman?”

Mike leans in to her infectious mood and lets out a snort, grinning all the while. “Right, because what we just did *definitely* classifies me as a gentleman.”

El arches an eyebrow, teasing. “Hey, you were just doing what I wanted you to do. How is that *not* gentlemanly?”

Mike can’t help it: he laughs, amused and so very in love. God, he wants to live in this feeling for the rest of his life. “Yes, I see the error of my ways, now. I live to serve, apparently.”

“And don’t you forget it,” El says, leaning forward to press a quick kiss to his lips. “Alright, you can walk me to my door now.”

“Yay for me,” Mike says with a sigh.

They untangle themselves from each other and Mike immediately

misses the feel of El pressed up against him as he watches her grab her jacket and then her bag from the backseat.

The air outside the car is frigid, their breath fogging in front of their faces with every exhale. Mike takes El's hand in his as she leads them to her front door. Mike spares a moment to look at her house – a nice brownstone, a handful of stairs leading up to the door, two stories tall, a couple of dim lights shining in the windows to illuminate the inside so El doesn't get home in the dark. He can't wait to go inside someday, to see how she fills the spaces of the place she calls home.

Together, Mike and El walk up the short flight of stairs up to her door, facing each other as they stop in front of it. Mike watches as she fishes her keys out of her duffle bag and he rushes to memorize how she looks right in this moment – hair mussed from his fingers running through it, lips swollen, cheeks flushed, and, when she looks back up at him with her keys in hand, eyes sparkling with affection.

"Well, this is me," El says, head tilting towards her front door.

Mike smiles, but it feels a little sad and wistful. "You sure you don't want company tonight? Even if it's just to sleep?" He sounds desperate, he knows, but he just doesn't want to let her go.

El sighs and shakes her head. "As much as I want to say yes, I shouldn't. You're just too irresistible, Mike Wheeler."

Mike shrugs, pride swelling in his chest at her words, and grins. "Well, at least I tried."

"A for effort," El says, giggling.

"Ooh, I didn't know I was being *graded*," Mike says, trying not to laugh. "Tell me, how's the rest of my report card looking?"

El arches an eyebrow and smiles coyly up at him. "Kiss me good night and I'll let you know."

Mike's grin threatens to break his face, he's so happy. "Yes, ma'am," he says as he steps towards her. He reaches for her, hands sliding into her hair and tipping her face up so he can kiss her. Her lips part *just so* against his, her mouth sliding sweetly against his as she reaches up

to cup the back of his neck. Mike lets out a quiet groan as he pours everything he is into kissing her, trying to convey everything that he's feeling with the simple act of his lips on hers.

Slowly, *reluctantly*, the kiss comes to an end. Mike pulls away, but keeps his hands in El's hair, not willing to let her go just yet. She's staring up at him, lips just barely parted, eyes wide, cheeks flushed, and Mike, once again, is blown away but just how *beautiful* she is. "A-plus," she whispers.

Mike's brow furrows, confused. His brain is thoroughly scrambled by *her*, so he has no idea what she's talking about. "What?"

"Your report card," El says, her lips turning up in a small smile. "A-pluses all across the board."

Mike laughs, shaking his head, memory rushing back in. He can't help but marvel at her and he knows he's always going to be in awe of this amazing, beautiful woman whose happiness is bubbly and infectious. "You're something else, El Hopper."

"I could say the same about you," El says, reaching up to press one last kiss against his lips. "I'll call you tomorrow, after I get to my parents' house."

Mike relinquishes his hold on her, letting her slip from his grip. "Can't wait. Good luck tomorrow, and drive safe getting home."

El smiles, nodding. "I will. I had a great time with you tonight."

Mike smiles. "Me, too. And I can't wait to do it again."

Blushing, El glances down briefly before looking back up at him, her smile soft and gentle. "Good night, Mike."

Mike takes a step back, reaching back with his foot to start down the stairs. "Good night, El."

El unlocks her door and glances at him once more before she slips inside, the door shutting behind her, taking her out of his reach. Mike lets out a harsh sigh, but he's still smiling a little as he heads back to his car.

Because he knows that, while the next few weeks are going to be tough, being separated from her, when they're both finally back in Chicago?

That's when their story is *really* going to begin.

And he can't *wait*.

Notes for the Chapter:

SO, how about *that*, yeah? *coughs*

Right, *anyway*.....Hopefully, I'll have the next chapter out in a few weeks or so (as long as I have no more life-altering emergencies, or anything, knock on wood), but it's been taking me a little more effort to write since I'm just emotionally exhausted all the time now, so it could be a month until I get the next chapter out. We'll see, who knows. Thanks for sticking with me this far. Like I said in the notes up top, I know this is really silly, but it's all in good fun, so I hope this hasn't turned anyone off!

Also, come hit me up on Tumblr if any of y'all want to chat (if you already haven't that is...). I'm @fatechica, so please come and bug me!

7. All I Want For Christmas Is You

Notes for the Chapter:

Haha, um...holy shit? How do all of my chapters end up so freaking long?!?! I lost control of this entire enterprise a very long time ago and it's only my adherence to my chapter structure that's keeping this from going completely off the rails, y'all. Like, *SERIOUSLY*.

I almost want to apologize for a) how long this is and b) how *plotless* this is, but it's a chapter about love and longing and that's all there is too it. I hope you all like a lot of dialogue, because that's pretty much all you're about to get.

Note: Also, I feel like I gotta at least warn y'all of the sheer amount of flirtiness that's about to come your way, some of it *preeeetty* suggestive. I'm sorry but, also...I'm not.

For the second night in a row, Mike goes to bed with a smile on his face and a song in his heart.

Ok, maybe that's cheesy. Like, *really* cheesy. Not to mention incredibly trite.

But there's no denying just how *happy* he is as he settles in bed for the night, hair damp from a quick shower.

And it's not because of what happened in the car with El not an hour ago...well, ok, he's not going to lie to himself – that's *definitely* part of it.

(Really, Mike's only human, after all, with needs and desires like most other people, and he's *wanted* El for what feels like forever. And while there's still a lot he needs, *wants*, to learn about El on a physical level, he knows so much more than he did a few hours ago. He knows the press of her thighs against his hips, the weight of her

breasts in his palms. He knows the rhythm of her body against his as she chases her pleasure with curling hips and heated friction; the way she looks and sounds as she falls apart – the passionate pitch of her cries, the flush on her cheeks, the shape of her lips as her mouth parts just so, the way that her head falling back, body arching, emphasizes the elegant sweep of her neck.

These are things Mike *knows* now, things he no longer has to guess about, and he can fill his fantasies with all of the details he knows to be true instead of using his imagination. There are still things Mike doesn't know – what she looks like fully bared to him, how her skin feels like against his with nothing between them...how it feels to *be* with her in all the ways a man can be with a woman, to drive her to that peak over and over again with all the ways he wants to touch her, to lose himself so wholly in her that he will never be able to tell where he ends and she begins – but he *knows* he'll find out soon enough and, *holy shit*, he can't believe how lucky, how *blessed* he is.)

But Mike's happiness is so much *more* than simple physical satisfaction. El is amazing – beautiful and sweet and funny, dynamic and smart, just everything he's ever wanted in a person. She's not perfect, Mike knows – no one is, really – but he thinks she just might be perfect *for him*, the person who could help smooth out his rough edges or make up for his shortcomings while he does the same for her.

And so, Mike can't help but picture *forever* with her, can't help but want it all the way down to the depths of his soul so that it's practically etched across his bones and embedded in his DNA.

Yeah, he already misses her and resents the timing that's going to keep them separated for the next few weeks. But, they have cell phones and computers and he'll still be able to hear her voice and maybe see her over video chat or something. Mike just won't be able to touch her or kiss her and *that sucks*.

Still, his happiness isn't dampened at all as he falls asleep that night and, by the time he wakes up, it's settled into a soft, warm contentment. It mixes with the gentle heat of desire that still simmers low in his blood, the remnants of the dreams that wove through his subconscious as he slept combined with the memories of last night.

So, despite the forced separation, Mike wakes up on Sunday feeling like he's on top of the world.

It's just after 8:30 when full consciousness hits (or, as close Mike can get pre-coffee) and Mike squints a bit against the light that peeks through the gaps between the slats of the blinds. With El on his mind, he reaches for his phone, cooler air prickling against the bare skin of his arm. Mike's not sure what El's schedule is like today, so he doesn't want to call her in case she's busy. But he can still shoot her a quick text message.

Which he does without hesitation.

Good morning, beautiful, is what he sends her before he pushes himself out from bed, phone clutched in his hands as he holds his arms close to his bare chest to preserve warmth on his way to the bathroom, thin flannel PJ pants swirling around his legs.

Mike keeps an ear out for a response as he goes about his morning routine – going to the bathroom, brushing his teeth – expecting to get a text message in return.

What he gets, instead, surprises him a bit.

Because, a few minutes after he sends his text message, his phone rings.

And it's El calling him.

Heart leaping into his throat, Mike hurries to answer the phone. And as he presses his phone against his ear, drawing in a breath to say hello, Mike feels a smile stretch his lips. "Morning," he says, leaning back against his bathroom counter, free hand braced on the edge, fingers curling around the lip.

"Hey there, handsome," El says in response, her tone gentle and flirty all at the same time in a way that simultaneously sends shivers down Mike's spine while warming him from within.

Emotion swells in his chest, overwhelming and breathtaking, and Mike knows in this moment that he would do anything as long as she keeps talking to him like this.

Even being separated from her for 3 weeks.

The thrill that runs through El at the sight of Mike's text message almost takes her breath away – how easy she is, swept away just by the simple act of being called “beautiful” by that man – and it takes her a bit to collect herself enough to respond.

El's in the middle of getting ready to head out the door for her last series of warm ups, but everything just stops as she gets lost in the thought of *him*.

Last night was just *magical*. From having him come visit her backstage, looking overwhelmed and nervous in the best way possible before kissing her in a way that she *still* feels all the way down to her toes, even hours later; to spending the evening in a dimly lit restaurant, snuggled up together while they trade soft, intimate kisses; to every minute in his car from the moment he parked in front of her house, his mouth hot on her lips and neck, his hands touching her with such gentle confidence, driving her higher and higher as he moved beneath her, his body warm and hard against hers. No other man has *ever* made El feel the way Mike made her feel last night – safe, desired, cared for, *worshiped* – and all she knows is that she wants *more*.

So, when Mike texts her that morning, El knows that she can't just text him back.

No, she needs to hear his voice.

Right now.

With fingers that tremble with excitement, El hurries to call Mike while she stands in her bedroom as she finishes packing the two mostly full suitcases laid out on the made bed in front of her.

Mike answers just after the first ring and El can hear him take in a deep breath before he speaks, sounding like he's gulping a bit for air.

“Morning,” is how he greets her, his voice sounding a little more awake than it did yesterday morning, but still raspy with sleep. El shivers a bit at the sound of it, low and intimate, and she *so badly* wants to wake up to that sound.

Just another reason to regret not inviting him in last night, an oh-so helpful part of her brain reminds her, the part that is fueled by her libido and *so very much* wants to know what it’s like to have Mike Wheeler in her bed.

El tries to shake away the thought of her and Mike in bed together, but it clings tight to the forefront of her mind, making her feel a little breathless. “Hey there, handsome,” she says over the phone, a little flirtier than she intended – not surprising given how her thoughts are filled with *Mike and naked*.

Mike’s laugh resonates in her ear and it echoes a bit, the sound bouncing off the walls wherever he is. “You sure are good for a guy’s ego, I’ll give you that.”

El grins as she picks up one of the shirts she’s bringing with her and begins folding it. “Hey, I only tell the truth, here. No inflating of egos.”

Mike chortles. “Oh god, so many double entendres I could make right now.”

“You could make them if you wanted. Lord knows I wouldn’t mind,” El says with a giggle of her own, feeling happy and buoyant.

“Does this also fall into your definition of ‘gentlemanly?’” Mike asks, teasing.

“Maybe,” El says coyly, pausing in her packing to lean against her bed, one hip propped against the soft surface. She reaches up and twirls a lock of hair around her finger. “Or maybe I just want to hear you talk dirty, you ever think of that?”

Mike makes a choking noise that devolves into a quick cough. “Jesus Christ, I’m never going to be able to win this tête-à-tête, am I?”

El’s giggle makes a return. “Ooh, French,” she says, shimmying her

shoulders a bit. “You trying to seduce me, Mr. Wheeler?”

“That depends, Ms. Hopper. Is it working?” Mike shoots back without hesitation.

“Hmm, I think what happened last night is your answer,” El says and she bites her lip at the memory. “You won me over quite sufficiently.”

“Are you sure?” Mike asks and El can hear him grinning. “Because I don’t think I got to show you the full scope of my repertoire.”

El gasps, feeling more than playful. “Are you suggesting you have *moves*? ”

“Why don’t you come over and find out?”

Mike speaks with a voice that is pitched low, almost whispering the words, and the sound of his voice, plus what he’s suggesting, hits El like a physical blow. She gasps, suddenly feeling too hot, like the room is 15 degrees warmer than it was mere moments ago. “You’re a dangerous temptation.”

“As long as it’s *you* I’m tempting, I’m ok with that.”

El giggles, the sound trailing off into a sigh. “So, where are you, anyway? Your voice is all echo-y.”

“I’d just finished brushing my teeth, so I’m in the bathroom,” Mike says. “So, nothing but hard surfaces.”

El’s lips twitch with a smile she barely suppresses. *Hard surfaces*, her brain repeats, inner voice full of suggestion, and she somehow manages to take the high road and *ignore* it. “Sounds like you’re just lazing around today. It’s almost 9 and you’re *just* getting out of bed?”

“You got it,” Mike says, owning up to it.

El lets out a sigh that’s practically a scoff. “Probably not even *dressed* yet,” she says with a teasing scold.

“I’m not even wearing a shirt.”

El almost whimpers, but she holds it back. She remembers when she saw Mike without a shirt on when she caught him swimming on campus, the image permanently etched in her memory, and she so very much wants to see it again someday. *Soon.* “Well, there’s a mental image. Dare I ask what you *are* wearing?”

“You wanna play that game? When we’re not going to see each other for almost three weeks? You’re a crueler woman than I thought.”

“Well, if not now, then when?” El asks in return, knowing, just *knowing* the words “what are you wearing” are going to be uttered more than once over the coming days.

There’s a beat of silence and El can almost hear Mike thinking. “Hmm, you raise an excellent point. So, what are *you* wearing, then?”

El laughs. *Called it.* “I’m fully dressed for the day, that’s what I’m wearing,” she says. “I’m just finishing up packing before I head out.”

Mike lets out a soft, sad hum. “Sounds like you’re pretty busy.”

El nods and turns to stuff the last of her clothes in her suitcases. “Yeah, I’m heading out right after my last performance.”

“Ok, *that* I don’t like hearing,” Mike says.

El cringes, understanding the sentiment. “Trust me, I wish I were staying with here with you. I really, *really* do.”

“I do, too,” Mike says, sighing. “You should probably finish packing, though, huh?”

El nods, even though she knows Mike can’t see it. “Yeah. I just wanted to hear your voice, though.”

“Well, I always like hearing your voice,” Mike says. “So call me whenever you want.”

“I’ll call you when I get to my parents’ house, I promise,” El says, feeling her heart squeeze in her chest with the knowledge that she’s about to get off the call when all she wants to do is keep talking to Mike, to never stop hearing his voice.

"I'm going to hold you to that," Mike says. "Good luck today with your performances and drive safe, ok?"

"I will," El says, sighing with unrepressed longing. "Bye Mike. I'll talk to you tonight." It feels like an insufficient goodbye, but there's nothing else El can say and it's way too soon to be saying *I love you* – even though El's 100% sure she's heading down that path

Mike lets out a soft breath. "Looking forward to it. Bye, El."

El lets out a sad sounding whine as she hangs up the phone and immediately chastises herself. Good god, how *old* is she? *Not 28, that's for damn sure.* No, she's acting more like a 13 year old girl, where every small thing is the end of the world. She can't help it, though. She's never felt like this with *anyone* in her entire life. Is it any wonder she resents having to pump the breaks for the next few weeks when all she wants to do is dive in headfirst?

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts and get her head back in the game, El hurries to finish packing so she can make sure everything is set for her to be gone for a few weeks, including the side trip she's taking to New York City for New Year's to spend time with the friends she made while she was dancing with the ABT – a side trip that she's had planned for months that she very much wishes she could cancel, even though her friends would kill her for flaking out last minute.

It's maybe 5 minutes later when El finally heads out her front door, bags in hand, house clean and shut down except for a few lights to keep on in her absence. She shivers when the early morning air cuts through the meager layers she's wearing and she hustles to lock her door behind her before making the mad dash to her car, tossing her things in her trunk before hurrying to get behind the wheel.

And, as she drives to the theater, El steels herself for the day ahead of her. *Just a couple more performances before no more Nutcracker for another year at least.*

And then Hawkins, here I come.

The sun has long since set by the time El pulls up in front of the house she spent her high school years in. Gravel and the remnants of snow crunch under her tires as she slowly rolls her car up the driveway and El peers at the house through the windshield. All the downstairs lights are on – not unusual given that it's just after 7:30. El's only had the car in park for a few seconds when the front door opens, light spilling out onto the porch, and a tall figure steps into the open doorway.

Dad.

El kills the ignition and slides out of the front seat into the cold, night Hawkins air, purse thrown over her shoulder. “Hi, Daddy.”

“Ellie, sweetheart,” Hop says as he bounds down the stairs for her with a cadence that is almost a skip. She meets him part way, reaching for him as he opens his arms to receive her. And then Hop’s hugging her, folding his arms around her in a tight embrace that settles over her like a warm, familiar blanket. Hugging her dad never fails to make her feel like a kid, no matter how old she gets, and El hugs him back just as tight, her arms wrapping around his ever-expanding middle.

“I think you’ve been enjoying one too many doughnuts, Dad,” El says, giggling into Hop’s chest. She tries to pull back, but Hop won’t let her go. Not yet.

“Is my daughter, my only child, the light of my life...calling me *fat*? You got some nerve, kid.” Hop gives her a final squeeze before he pulls away enough to look down at her, grinning despite the eyebrow-arching glare he’s giving her.

“Hey, I’m not the one eating doughnuts. I bet Flo is *real* pleased with your diet.”

“She been tattling on me? That’s it, she’s off my fruitcake list this year.”

El scrunches her nose as she pulls back. “Ew, Dad. *No one* likes

fruitcake.”

Hop waggles his eyebrows and chuckles. “That’s the whole point.” He pulls back the rest of the way and jerks his head in the direction of her car. “Help you with your bags? Joyce is almost done with dinner.”

El can’t help it: she *cringes*. “Joyce is cooking?” She loves her step-mom, she *really* does. But, *oh god* the woman cannot cook.

Hop gives her a conspiratorial look. “Are you kidding me? She’s just reheating a casserole I made last night.”

El’s almost ashamed at the sigh of relief she lets out. “Ok, good. I *really* don’t want food poisoning. I need to meet Ms. Trainor early in the morning to get started on the pageant costumes and I don’t want to do it feeling like I’m going to throw up the entire time.”

Hop gives her a look before he goes over to her car, popping her trunk to get her things out. “You do know you’re not in high school anymore, right? You *can* call your teachers by their first name. Shouldn’t you know this already, being a teacher yourself?”

El follows behind her dad and closes the trunk once his hands are full with her bags. “Yes, I know,” she says, rolling her eyes. “But old habits die hard, as you well know.” The gravel shifts and resettles underfoot as she walks by Hop’s side.

“Tell me about it,” Hop says with a snort as they go up the porch stairs. “I *still* crave a cigarette before reading a new case file.”

El narrows her eyes at Hop. “Still smoke-free, though?”

“Since before you started high school,” Hop says, giving her a wry grin. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. You’re not getting rid of me any time soon.”

“Good,” El says with a sniff as she walks into the house behind Hop, closing the door as she steps over the threshold. “I want you around for a long time, you hear me?”

Hop’s grin softens to a smile and El takes a look at him in the light of

the front hall. The lines around his eyes and mouth are more pronounced, his beard more silver than dark blond, but the twinkle in his eye and the curve of his smile are still *him*, still her dad. “Loud and clear, Ellie.” He winks at her, the moment passing. “Now, go say hi to your step-mom before she runs you over, ok? I’m going to put your things upstairs.”

El smiles. “Thanks, Dad.”

Hop laughs. “Don’t mention it. Though, would it have killed ya to pack a little lighter? Jeeze, you’d think you were going on an expedition for 6 months, rather than home for a couple of weeks.”

El rolls her eyes as she brushes past him. “Yeah, yeah, old man. You just don’t want to admit you’re losing it in your old age.”

“I’m not going to dignify that with a response, spawn of mine. Now, into the kitchen with you.”

With that, Hop goes upstairs and El turns to head into the kitchen, immediately spotting Joyce standing by the kitchen counter, plating dinner. “Joyce, hi!” El exclaims as she crosses over into the kitchen.

Joyce pauses in what she’s doing and turns to El with a pleased smile stretching across her face. “El, honey, you made it!”

“I did!” El says as she approaches for a hug from Joyce. Joyce’s embrace is warm and gentle, but still firm. And when El pulls back, she takes a look at her step-mom. Joyce hasn’t aged nearly as much as Hop has, but there are strands of silver shooting through her dark hair and her crow’s feet are maybe a little more pronounced than they were a few years ago. But she still looks good, still warm and beautiful.

“How was the drive, honey?” Joyce says. “Also, mind helping me get these plates onto the table?”

“Not at all,” El says as she sets her purse on the counter and grabs a couple of full plates. “And the drive was good. Not much traffic. And thankfully it hasn’t snowed a lot recently, so that helped.”

“Good. And your performances? They went well?”

El slides the plates onto the table, where Hop and Joyce are sitting, and turns to go back to her purse. “Yeah, they were fine. I’m exhausted, though. I think I’ve had enough of ‘The Nutcracker’ to last me until next year at least.” El reaches into her purse for her phone. She promised to call Mike when she got to her parents’ house and, well...El doesn’t break her promises. “Hey, Joyce, I’m going to step into the living room to make a quick call.”

Joyce looks up from where she’s placing El’s plate on the table, brow furrowed in concerned confusion. “Everything ok?”

El smiles. “Yeah, everything’s fine. Just promised someone I’d call when I got here.”

There must be something in El’s voice that gives away some of what’s really going on, because the smile that crosses Joyce’s face is sly and knowing at the same time in a way that makes El a little wary. “Alright, go make your call,” Joyce says. “But don’t take too long. You know how your father *hates* waiting to eat.”

“Yeah, I know,” El says, grinning. “I won’t take long.” She waves her phone at Joyce. “Back in a sec.”

El makes her way across the first floor into the living room, sequestering herself in the split level den so she can call Mike. The den is dark except for the light coming from the side table in the living room and it helps everything feel quiet and intimate. *Perfect mood setting.* With a sigh, heart beating just a bit faster with the thought of *Mike*, El calls him, sinking down onto the couch as she presses the phone to her ear.

Mike answers a couple of seconds later. “Hey,” he says, breathing the word with something almost akin to relief. “You made it.”

El smiles, warmed by the sound of his voice. “Yes, I did. Hi there.”

“Hi,” Mike says back, a smile in his voice. “You settling in back home ok?”

El nods. “Yeah, but I don’t have long to talk – dinner’s on the table and if I take too long, my dad might kill me – but I know I promised

to call when I got here, so....” El pauses, shrugging. “Here I am.”

Mike lets out a low laugh. “Promise kept. You’ve upheld your end of the bargain.”

“Wait, what was *your* end of the bargain? What do I get?” El asks with a giggle.

“The pleasure of hearing my voice, that’s what,” Mike says and El can hear him trying not to laugh.

“Hmm, not sure this trade is exactly fair,” El says leadingly. “I mean, *really*, what is the value I’m getting out of this?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mike says, huffing a sigh that makes El dissolve into giggles. “Alright, laugh it up, Hopper. Go eat your dinner.”

El manages to get her giggles under control so she can speak again. “Ok, ok. I’ll call you later tonight?”

“Looking forward to it,” Mike says. “Talk to you in a bit.”

El hangs up the phone and can’t help but sigh as she walks to the dinner table, slipping her phone into her back pocket before she sits down.

Hop and Joyce are already sitting down when El slides into her seat, Joyce across from her and Hop at the head of the table between them. The other three chairs that circle the table are empty, but El knows that in a few days, all the chairs will be occupied once Will, Greg, and Jon arrive.

“Did you reach your friend?” Joyce asks as El lays her napkin over her lap.

“Yeah, I did,” El says.

“So, which friend is this?” Hop asks, giving El a curious, amused look, one eyebrow just barely arched.

It takes all of El’s meager acting ability to keep her face as neutral as possible and she prays she can fight off the blush she knows is

threatening to rise up on her cheeks. “Just someone I work with,” El says, looking him straight in the eye, hoping to throw her dad off the trail. Last time she was home, for Thanksgiving, she told Hop some about Mike, about her crush on him and how she thought he might feel something for her too, but she’s not about to admit to *her parents* that she’s dating someone when it’s barely a couple of days old.

Hop holds her gaze for a long moment, a little longer than strictly necessary – *he knows*. El’s not sure how, but he *does* – before he smiles. “How was the drive from Chicago?” he asks, moving the topic of discussion on to something else and El finds herself sighing in relief as she answers, describing the journey back to Hawkins.

Dinner passes easily over the next 45 minutes or so – El catching Hop and Joyce up about work and her dancing, Joyce filling El in on the goings-on around town while Hop provides his usual colorful commentary – and after, El helps clear the table before going back to the table to bid Joyce and Hop good night. “I’m going to head up and take a shower before going to bed,” El says in between leaning over to press kisses on their cheeks. “It’s been a long day and I just want to crash.” This is not the entire truth, El knows. While it is true that it’s been a long day and that she wants to lie down in bed...she’s not going to sleep yet. Not when she has someone waiting for her to call.

“Ok, good night, honey,” Joyce says.

“Sleep tight, Ellie,” Hop follows up. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

El grabs her purse and, with a final wave, heads up the stairs. The worn carpet is still soft beneath her feet, the slide of the bannister familiar beneath her hand. And when El steps into her teenage bedroom, Hop having turned on the light when he brought up her things, she lets the familiar warmth of the room wrap her in its nostalgic embrace, with its pale green walls and white, wooden furniture, a handful of old knickknacks scattered across various surfaces.

Technically speaking, this room isn’t her childhood bedroom – that’s back in a house in Indianapolis that Hop sold after he and her mom got divorced. But El still considers this to be *home* in the way that Indianapolis just isn’t. Hawkins is where she discovered that she

could pick herself up and start anew, it's the place where she found the rest of her family. And even though there have been other places that El has called home – first New York and now Chicago – part of El will always belong to Hawkins.

These are the thoughts that swim through her mind as she showers, temporarily distracted from thoughts of Mike: the meaning of home, how it can change, how old definitions can linger even long after moving away. It's quiet and meditative, exploring these concepts, and she's nice and relaxed as she finished getting ready for bed.

But still, a soft giddiness fills her as she crawls into bed, illuminated only by the light of her bedside lamp, and she grabs her phone from where she put it down on her nightstand so she can call Mike.

Her heart pounds in her chest, fluttering and racing, as she waits for Mike to pick up. And when he does, El sighs in relief even as she's smiling like a lovesick teenager. "Hey," El says, her voice soft and relaxed, *intimate*.

"Hey, how was dinner?" Mike asks, his voice just as soft as hers.

"Good, it was good. Thankfully, my *dad* cooked dinner, so I will survive through the night," El says as she shifts a bit under the covers, settling in and getting comfortable. "I love my step-mother, but a great cook, she is not."

"Hmm, that's about the only thing I'm looking forward to about going to my parents' house," Mike says. "My mother is an *amazing* cook."

El giggles. "Lucky you. I would have loved to grow up with a parent who knew how to cook."

"Yeah, but I could do without growing up alongside my parents' dysfunctional relationship," Mike says with a sigh, the sound speaking volumes. "But I don't want to talk about my parents' *horrible* relationship right now. How was your day?"

El lets out a soft, content sigh. "I did my last Nutcracker performances for an entire year and I've almost never been so happy

about something in my entire life.”

Mike laughs. “I thought it was a nice show,” he says, sounding adorably confused. El can just picture the look on his face – lips pulled down in a small frown, eyebrows furrowed – and she wants so badly to kiss him right now.

“It *is* a nice show,” El says. “But after you do it 10 times in two weeks, well...it loses some of the magic.”

“Alright, fair enough,” Mike says.

El lets out a low hum. “But, now I’m in bed and comfortable and life’s pretty good.”

“Hmm, sounds nice. You want company?” Mike asks, voice light with humor.

“You wanna drive 4 hours?” El asks with a soft, delicate snort.

There’s a brief pause, a moment of silence, before Mike speaks again. “Nah, not sure if it’s worth it,” he says and El can hear him trying not to laugh.

El sniffs with faux insult. “Fine, see if I let you take me out on that first date.”

“Ok, wait, after what happened last night, you’re *still* not considering that our first date?” Mike says, unable to hold some of his laughter back any longer.

“Absolutely not,” El says, grinning, caught up in Mike’s humor. “As amazing as last night was, it does not meet my criteria for a first date.”

“Pray tell, what *are* your criteria for a first date? I wanna make sure I do this right.”

El giggles, touched by Mike’s open eagerness. “Well, you’ll pick me up at my house and take me out to dinner at a nice restaurant that *both* of us dress up for. And then, after a nice meal, you’ll drop me off at home with a goodnight kiss.”

Mike breathes out a laugh. “That’s it, huh? The key to El Hopper’s heart?”

“That’s part of it,” El says, unable to stop smiling. “But I have faith you’ll figure out the rest of it.”

“Hopefully your faith isn’t misplaced,” Mike says, something in his voice making El’s breath hitch in her chest. “I don’t want to screw this up.”

“You won’t,” El says, almost whispering, the tone of their conversation turning from flirty to serious on a dime. “I don’t think there’s anything you could do to make me not want this.”

There’s a pregnant pause before Mike sighs and El shivers a bit at the sound. “You’re an amazing woman, El Hopper.”

The sincerity in Mike’s voice makes El’s heart squeeze painfully in her chest and she wants him next to her, wants to be in the same room as him where she can reach out and touch him, kiss him, *be* with him. How she’s going to last these weeks without him, she doesn’t know.

But she’s going to try.

“You’re amazing, too, don’t forget,” El says, her voice thick with emotion. “And I’ll make you see that if it’s the last thing I do.”

“I look forward to seeing how’ll you do that,” Mike says with a dry laugh.

El can’t help the way she smiles, eager and full of promise. “Oh, I’m sure you do,” she says, pausing to take a deep breath. “Anyway, how was *your* day? Do anything exciting?”

“Not really,” Mike says and El can hear him shrugging, the sound of fabric shifting over the line. “Just kinda lazed around the house for a while before I sat down to do some writing. I just know Kelly’s going to be on my ass to finish this book sooner rather than later.”

El giggles. “That a sixth sense?”

“Survival mechanism,” Mike says. “I can just feel it.”

“Like a disturbance in the Force.”

Mike lets out a noise that’s akin to a strangled groan. “Ok, you *can’t* make Star Wars references when you’re not physically next to me. That’s just *mean*. Because now I want to kiss you and I *can’t*.”

“Oh, so you only want to kiss me when I make Star Wars references?” El asks, biting her lip to try and contain her smile.

“Hey, wait, that’s *not* what I said. Don’t go putting words in my mouth.” El opens her mouth to speak, amusement sparkling in her veins, but Mike speaks a split second later, the low rumble of laughter in his voice. “And *yes*, I know the double entendre trap I just walked into. You don’t have to say anything. In fact, you can just let it live out there in the universe, unremarked.”

El pouts. “Aww, way to ruin all my fun,” El says, trying to sound sad, but she’s too amused to pull it off. “Anyway, to get us onto safer topics, you did some writing today? Anything you can share?”

“Gee, this sounds an awful lot like fishing for spoilers, when I very much recall *someone* saying they didn’t *want* spoilers,” Mike says.

El frowns, thinking back to when she said that. “Oh, yeah, that’s right.” She pauses, reconsidering. “Well, I’ve changed my mind. Spoil me, Writer Man.”

“Oh boy, not touching *that* one,” Mike says under his breath before he lets out a light laugh. “Ok, this is actually convenient since I need someone to bounce an idea off of, anyway. So, at the end of the last book....”

For almost the next hour, Mike tells El about his next book, El providing feedback and the two of them talking out ideas. And, the entire time, despite El’s excitement at getting the inside scoop of one of her favorite book series, she can’t help but wish Mike was here in person telling her these things. But, if she has to be separated from him, at least she can still talk to him, can still hear his voice in her ear. It’s enough for the moment, hopefully enough to sustain her until she gets back to Chicago.

It'll have to be.

The drive from Chicago to Indianapolis isn't terribly long, as far as things go. It's pretty much just a straight shot down I-65 – no complicated directions or a bajillion freeway interchanges.

But it's super boring and Mike *hates* it. It's just miles and miles of farm country, the monotony only broken up by a couple of pit stops through some small cities.

Luckily, Mike has a handful of podcasts to listen to in the car, so that helps him pass the time as he makes his way to his parents' house late on Wednesday morning and he lets the road go by in a blur.

But, as always, Mike notes the turnoff to the road that leads to Hawkins and, as always, he's tempted to take a very long detour, to pass through the town he will forever associate with childhood. And, this year, the temptation is *especially* strong – so strong, he almost turns around when he passes the turnoff.

He doesn't though, but the yearning is still there, even though there's really no reason for him to go to Hawkins – none of the rest of the Party has even left Chicago yet and the only other people he knows in Hawkins are his friends' parents who would probably be really confused why their child's friend is stopping by randomly. So, the only thing he could really do in Hawkins would be to drive down the streets he used to know and reminisce.

Not really worth the 2-3 hours the detour would take.

But, *man*, does he really want to. And he wishes he knew why.

It's the early afternoon when Mike finally pulls up in front of his parents' house and, for a moment, he just sits in the car, staring up at the upper-middle class, suburban home.

Bigger than his own home back in Hawkins, the house in Indianapolis is pretty impressive – 5 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, a large open-concept

living space big enough for Karen Wheeler to throw lavish dinner parties for all of Ted Wheeler's coworkers and spouses.

It's a beautiful house, especially decorated like it is for the Christmas holiday, with lights and wreaths and ribbons, looking warm and homey.

And Mike wishes he were literally anywhere *but* here.

The years he spent here were miserable, stifling despite the space, filled as it was – still is, really – with the looming presence of his parents' failed marriage. His loneliest years were spent here, separated from his friends, counting down the days until he could be reunited with them once more. Once he graduated from high school, Mike took off for Chicago and never looked back. He only comes here when he has to and, just like always, he's already itching to get home.

It's especially bad this year because of El, because he just wants to be where she is...*wherever* that is. It hasn't come up in conversation yet, where they're both from. Mike's a little curious, but not enough to go out of his way to bring it up. Not when there are so many other interesting things to talk about when he's on the phone with El.

Like how much they miss each other and what they want to do on their first date (no matter how much Mike tries to convince El otherwise that last Saturday was actually their first date, she's surprisingly stubborn about her first date checklist). Or about other things they want to do when they're both back in Chicago, even things that aren't related to this new relationship they've found themselves in – like movies they want to see or restaurants they want to go to. Hell, they even have a great time talking about what the second half of the school year is going to be and how their coworkers are going to react when they find out Mike and El are dating each other.

(This is mostly because Mike knows he's not going to be able to be in the same room as El and *not* give away everything. Not when most of his coworkers know he has feelings for her *in the first place*.)

So, the details of Mike and El's childhoods hasn't come up yet. But

Mike knows they'll get there. He wants to find out *everything* about her and he has all the time in the world to do it. He's in no hurry, not when he's having so much fun with this slow, sweet dance they have going on.

But, now that he's thinking about her (which, really, is almost always these days), he *needs* to talk to her.

Maybe she can give me a pep talk before I have to head into the lion's den.

Mike unplugs his phone from the center console and unlocks it so he can call her. He holds the phone to his ear with one hand while his other arm wraps tight across his chest, like he's trying to give himself a reassuring hug.

God, he hopes she answers. Mike knows El's been helping out her old dance club teacher with preparations for that Christmas recital thing and he's not sure exactly when during the day she's committed to helping. *Hopefully she's on a break, or can spare a couple of moments.*

Thankfully, El does pick up a couple of rings into the call and she sounds a little out of breath as she answers. "Mike, hi!"

Mike can't help it – he smiles, mouth curling up in a smile so wide, it almost hurts his cheeks. He feels himself relaxing at hearing her say his name, the arm wrapped around his torso dropping so his hand's resting on his thigh. She just sounds so fucking cute, all bubbly and excited and *happy*. "Hey, I didn't call at a bad time, did I?"

"No, not at all," El says. But something crashes in the background a beat later and Mike almost chokes his laughter as he struggles to hold it back. "Oops."

Mike laughs, unable to hold it back. "Jesus, what was that?"

"Um, just a stack of folding chairs falling over. I'm setting up the chairs for the audience so that the kids can get a sense of how many people are going to be here to see them perform," El says, sounding contrite.

"Everything ok? Nothing broken?"

“Uh...” El says, pausing for a moment – presumably to look. “I don’t think so?”

Mike snorts. “I don’t think that should have sounded like a question.”

“Yeah, yeah, everyone’s a critic,” El grumbles, sighing. “So, anyway, despite my issues with preventing things from falling over, what’s going on? Not that I don’t like hearing your voice, though.”

Mike smiles. “Just pulled up in front of my parents’ house. Could use something nice to boost me up before walking in to the hell that is ‘Christmas with the Family’.”

“Aww, poor baby,” El says, voice soft and cooing before it takes a breathy turn. “Want me to kiss it better?”

The low, almost seductive tone in El’s voice causes Mike’s breath to hitch in his chest and a gasp lodges in his throat. “Would you? I’d really appreciate it.”

“Just tell me where it hurts.” El’s voice is *definitely* in seductive territory now, all low and breathy, full of desire.

Mike groans, feeling it reverberate in his entire chest, as his blood begins to warm. “You’re playing a dangerous game, Ms. Hopper,” he teases, feeling out of breath.

“It’s not a game if I’m sincerely offering,” El says. “I’ll kiss you anywhere you want me to.”

Holy. Shit. Mike gulps against the desire that rushes through him, his mind spinning with the mental images El’s words inspire. “I’m going to hold you to that,” Mike says, his throat thick, the words coming out with a groan, all strangled and needy.

El lets out a soft gasp, the sound pitched at the end as it trails off into a light moan. “You promise?”

“Promise,” Mike says and he almost *growls* the word.

“Mmm, looking forward to it,” El says and Mike *loves* how breathy she sounds, like he’s affecting her the same way she’s affecting him.

"So, did that help distract you from the hell you're about to walk into?"

At the question, a weak laugh bursts out of him, leaving Mike feeling a little incredulous. "Oh my god, were you seducing me as a way to distract me?"

"Did it work?" El asks and Mike can practically *see* the way she's probably smiling, biting her lips as her eyes sparkle with amusement.

"Of course it worked," Mike says. "God, I don't think even *monks* could fail to be seduced by you."

El laughs dryly. "Thanks, I think." She pauses, sighing. "I should probably get back to setting up, though. And you should go inside. The longer you put it off, the worse it'll be."

"Yeah, I know," Mike says, sighing. "Talk to you tonight, then?"

"Yeah, I'll call you. It's my turn, remember?"

Mike grins; he and El have been taking turns calling each other. "I'll be waiting."

"Looking forward to it. Good luck in there."

"Thanks," Mike says, feeling a bit wry. "You too. Try not to knock the building over, ok?"

"Oh, ha, ha, funny man," El says, trying to sound chastising, but Mike can hear the laughter underlying her voice. "I'll talk to you later. Bye, Mike."

"Bye, El."

Mike sighs as he hangs up the phone and he takes a moment to stare down at the screen. He navigates to his text messages, where he can see the pictures of her that she's sent over to him, the 2 or 3 selfies she took while she was getting her makeup done for one of her Nutcracker performances. It hits him, as it always does, with just how gorgeous she is, beautiful and stunning and just so goddamn *pretty*. The sight of her never fails to make his heart skip a beat or two (or

five) and he can't wait until he can see her in person again.

Maybe I should Facetime with her or help her get Skype set up on her computer, or something. Just so I can actually see her while we talk.

But, El's right – Mike's been sitting out in the car for too long, delaying the inevitable.

It's time to man up, as it were.

So Mike slips his phone back into his pocket and exits the car, jacket pulled tight around him to ward against the chill in the air. And, a few moments later, he's walking up the front steps towards the front door, backpack and duffle bag slung over his shoulders.

Mike still has a key to the house that he keeps on his keyring, so he just lets himself in. "Hello?" Mike calls out, waiting to see if anyone answers. He figures at least Holly and his mom are home, but he knows Nancy isn't coming back until Friday and his dad's for sure at work (the man practically *lives* at the office, according to his mom).

"In the kitchen, honey!"

Mike's lips quirk up in a quick smile and he drops his things off by the stairs before heading further into the house. The smells of Christmas surround him – the pine of the Christmas tree, the wreaths and complementing candles his mom stages around the house, the tininess of the tinsel and ornaments – and there's the faint sounds of Christmas music coming from the direction of the kitchen.

Once he passes through the entryway, where the stairs lead up from, practically all of the first floor is one giant room and he looks towards the direction of the kitchen, where both his mom and Holly are. Holly's sitting on a barstool at the large kitchen island while his mom bustles around and Mike's nose is assaulted by the smell of baking cookies.

Holly's munching on what looks like a snickerdoodle, long dark blonde hair pulled back in a messy bun, and she looks over at him, grinning as she spots him. "'Sup, nerd?"

Mike can't help but smile as he sees his baby sister and he heads

straight for her. “Well, if it isn’t the little pipsqueak,” Mike says as he wraps her in a tight hug from behind, arms tight around her shoulders and head, the knuckles of one hand rubbing hard against the crown of her hair. He looks over at his mom, giving her a soft smile that is at odds with the smothering stranglehold he has on his sister. “Hi, mom.”

Karen gives him a look that is half amused, half exasperated and she shakes her head at him as she reaches for her partially filled glass of chardonnay. Mike raises an eyebrow. *She’s starting early today.* “Hello, Michael. Did you have a good drive over?”

Mike shrugs. “It was alright.”

“Ack, get off!” Holly cries out, but her voice is muffled by Mike’s jacket and it loses some of its effect.

“Oh, come on. Is that how you ask your big brother for something?”

Holly reaches back and smacks Mike on the side of the face with her hand, bopping him several times. Mike just laughs and moves so his face is out of reach, but he doesn’t let go. “Get off of me, dickhead!”

“Wow, such language,” Mike chides. “I give my students detention for mouthing off like that, you know.”

Holly manages to wriggle her way out of Mike’s grip and she turns to punch him in the arm. “You’re a still a jerk.”

“And you’re still a brat, I see,” Mike says. The exchange is without true heat, as he and Holly are both smiling at each other.

“Well, I am the typical *baby* of the family,” Holly says, rolling her eyes. “Hey, come on. I got something I want to show you.”

Mike shrugs. “Ok, sure. I gotta take my stuff upstairs, anyway. Just let me....” Mike reaches to grab a cookie before he gives his mom a quick hug. “Hi, again.”

“Hi, Mike. You better go follow your sister before she decides to poison your dinner,” Karen says with a light, fond laugh.

Holly scoffs. “Please, I’m a lot classier than that.” Mike looks over at her, eyebrow arched, and Holly grins. “I’ll just murder him in his sleep.”

Mike rolls his eyes as he pulls back from his mom. “Oh, because *that’s* so much more inconspicuous.” He looks over at Holly. “Lead the way, Holls.”

Holly responds with her own eye roll. “Like you don’t know where my room is, you loser.”

Mike grins as he follows Holly through the house, shucking off his jacket and scooping up his things by the stairs, all the while with a still-warm cookie clutched between his teeth. He’s eaten half of the cookie by the time he drops off his things in his room – which is mostly just a king sized bed with a dresser, a barren desk, and a couple of nightstands, all surrounded by pale grey walls and navy curtains; all of his posters and paraphernalia came with him to when he went to Chicago for his undergrad and never came back.

The cookie is all but gone by the time he finishes following Holly into her room, which is obnoxiously bright with yellow walls and posters *everywhere*. There’s piles of clothes on either side of her bed and stacks of papers and junk on her desk and dresser. Only Holly’s vanity is organized, but it’s still cluttered with makeup and jewelry and, *wow*, his sisters are the girliest girls *ever*.

Though Holly will kill me if I point that out.

“Jeez, did you teleport the mess from your dorm room back home, or something?” Mike asks, cringing as he looks around the room.

Holly just flips him off over her shoulder, not even looking at him, as she goes to one of her suitcases. Mike leans against her desk as she crouches on the ground to dig through the bag, standing moments later with a small package in her hands. “I’m doing you a niceness you don’t deserve, by the way,” she says as she hands over the small, flat package, maybe 7 inches square and about an inch thick.

Mike frowns as he looks at it. It’s wrapped in thick, brown paper and there’s no markings on it to indicate what might be inside. He looks

back at Holly, one eyebrow raised skeptically. “This isn’t my Christmas present, is it?”

“Would I be giving it to you 4 days before Christmas if it was? God, give me some credit, Mikey,” Holly says, crossing her arms over her chest as she sits down on the edge of her bed.

Mike’s lips twitch with a fleeing grin. “Sorry,” he says as he flips the package over a couple of times, looking for the seam of the paper.

“It’s ok,” Holly says as Mike slips a finger under one of the taped-over flaps. “I actually got this for you back in September and I *meant* to send it to you, but....” Holly trails off and Mike looks up to see her shrugging one shoulder, lazily and almost nonchalant. “It just never got around to it. This first semester was a bit of an adjustment and shit just got cray.”

“Yeah, I remember freshman year of college,” Mike says in sympathy as he finishes undoing the paper and begins pushing it aside. “It was just – *oh*.” With the paper cleared, Mike can see what it is Holly got for him and his heart thumps heavily in his chest, touched beyond measure. “Holly, this is....”

“A friend of a friend makes art that she sells at conventions and stuff,” Holly says, voice soft, as Mike looks down at the picture frame in his hand. Behind the glass is a beautiful, inked drawing of the main characters from his books, posing like they’re prepared to take on the world, all four of them standing with weapons in hand. His gaze goes first to Cassie, standing in the middle, sword in one hand and ready to strike, her dark red hair pulled up in a high ponytail.

And then there’s Thom, next to her, the leader, dark brown hair neat except for the handful of strands that fall into his face, looking powerful and resolute with a green-flamed lantern in one hand and a spell book in the other. Flanked by gentle Ali with his quarterstaff and fiercely protective Justin with a shotgun slung over one shoulder, it’s convenient that Cassie and Thom are standing next to each other, Mike thinks, especially since they’re going to be romantically involved in the third book.

Mike can’t help but smile at the memory of El’s reaction when he told

her about that particular plot point, the way she squealed and giggled, crowing “I knew it! I *knew* there was something going on between them!” through her laughter. There are a lot of similarities between Cassie and El, now that he’s thinking about it, both of them smart and caring and driven. El’s a lot less hot-headed than Cassie and not as guarded, but shier in her own way. Really, Mike can see why Cassie is El’s favorite character, given how similar they are.

God, he misses her.

But, still, this drawing is *incredible* and he looks up at his sister, mouth agape. “I can’t believe you got this for me. *Thank you,*” he says, voice just a little louder than a hushed whisper.

Holly blushes and looks away a bit. “It’s not that big of a deal. I didn’t pay for it, or anything. I managed to convince the artist that I knew the author – don’t worry, your secret identity is still safe – so she gave it to me to give to you.”

Mike smiles, feeling overwhelmed. He loves that people are inspired to create from his works, no matter if it’s cosplay or art or stories based off his works. “I’ll send you a signed set of my books to give to her as payment. This is *amazing*, Holly. Honestly, thank you for getting this for me. I’m gonna put this in my office at home.” Mike pushes away from the desk so he can lean over and give Holly a hug, a real one this time.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you like it,” Holly says as she hugs him back, arms tight around his torso. Mike knows that as much as he and Holly like to give each other shit and tease each other, they really do love each other so very much.

“So,” Mike says as the hug ends. “How *was* your first semester at college?”

Holly shudders, expression morphing into one of disgust. “Ugh, ask me after my final grades are in.” She shakes her head and smirks up at him. “I don’t wanna talk about school right now. Wanna go watch horrible Christmas movies with me while we pig out on Mom’s cookies, instead?”

“And make Mom mad at us by ruining our dinner?” Mike laughs before he shrugs, nodding. “Sure, sounds good.”

Mike and Holly head downstairs after Mike drops off the picture from Holly in his room. “So, 10 bucks Dad doesn’t show up for dinner tonight,” Holly says as they make their way through the hallway, glancing up at him with a humorless smirk on her face.

Mike scoffs and rolls his eyes, frowning at the thought of his dad. “Yeah, right, like I’m stupid enough to take *that* bet. Dinner’s gonna be bad enough as it is with you lording winning a bet over my head.”

And yet, despite knowing that dinner was going to be bad, it’s somehow even *worse* than Mike thinks possible.

He and Holly somehow manage to not completely ruin their entire appetites while they watch the first two “Home Alone” movies, snacking on the cookies Karen’s been making.

But Ted Wheeler doesn’t come home for dinner.

Hell, he doesn’t even *call*.

So Mike and Holly spend the entire time, sitting across from each other at the dining room table, giving each other looks that speak volumes, while Karen drowns herself in wine and occasionally mutters, “His son’s home for dinner. You’d think he’d *want* to be here.” Karen tries to engage Mike and Holly in conversation, but it’s clear that her heart’s not in it, especially as she pours herself glass after glass of wine, her speech getting more and more slurred, her eyes drooping and her moves getting sloppy while Mike and Holly try to pretend like nothing is wrong.

Overall, it’s just sad. Like, *really* sad. The food’s great, but Mike would rather be eating out at a cheap fast food restaurant if it would improve the mood that’s taken over the reduced Wheeler family.

Man, if Mike didn’t hate his dad already, this would have probably

tipped him over the edge.

Fuck him, Mike thinks as he clears the table while Holly helps Karen up to bed. He scrapes off bits of food from the plates before putting them in the dishwasher and, the entire time, he's all but seething with rage towards his dad. He knows it's not healthy, knows he should find his way to letting this go. But Ted Wheeler has *never* cared about actually being a good dad or husband at any point in Mike's entire life and it's slowly killing Karen.

Mike fears the day he gets the call telling him that his mom's drunken herself to death and he prays to any higher power that's listening that it never, *ever* happens.

But Mike also knows his luck on the family front has never been good, so he's resigning himself to losing his mom a lot sooner than he's ready for, a lot sooner than he should. And it's all because of his dad, Mike thinks with gritted teeth.

Fuck Ted Wheeler.

Mike draws in a deep breath through his nose and tries to calm himself down so he doesn't accidentally break something while he finishes doing the dishes. Because the last thing he wants to do is fess up to his mom that he broke one of her plates.

Holly eventually comes back downstairs, popping into the kitchen after Mike's finished the dishes and has moved on to wiping down the counters. "Hey, need any help?" she asks.

Mike sighs bitterly. "No, just about finished here." He glances over at Holly and notes the pinched expression on her face, the skin around the corners of her eyes tight and strained, lips pulled down in a frown, making her look much older than her 18 years. "Mom ok?"

Holly laughs, but it's bloodless and ugly. "Not really, but I managed to get her into PJs and into bed, and there's a glass of water and some Advil on her nightstand." She comes up and leans against the kitchen island on the other side of Mike, elbows propping her up. "Man, *fuck* Dad. What an asshole."

"Sometimes I can't believe we came from *that*, you know?" Mike says, folding the drying cloth he's been using and laying it down on the granite countertop.

Holly sighs and drops her head on her folded arms. "I know," she says, voice muffled, before she raises her head to look at him. Mike's heart clenches at the sheen of tears he sees in his sister's eyes and wishes there was something he could do to make it better. "You'd think after years of being disappointed in him, he couldn't surprise me with how much of a douche he is. But, here we are." She gulps and looks down at her hands as she picks at her fingers – a nervous tick of hers since she was a little kid. "I worry about her when none of us are here, you know."

Mike bites his lip and nods. "Yeah, me too. I know she has a few friends here, but not like she had back in Hawkins. She never really adjusted to the move all that well. And, even though I'm the closest, it's still too far to make it out here on a regular basis."

Holly rolls her eyes. "Besides, you'd have to hear from him on a regular basis about how disappointed he is in you for being a teacher instead of an engineer or something. Or how like writing's not a 'real job'."

"Right," Mike says with a snort, thinking about the price of the movie deal Kelly's still negotiating for him, how it's more money than his dad has ever made in his entire life. "Not a 'real job,'" he says before he lowers his voice to mimic his dad. "'Real men work their way up the corporate ladder and make themselves miserable the entire time.'"

Holly lets out a chortling laugh. "Oh god, you sound *just* like him."

"Ugh, kill me now," Mike says with a shudder. "Honestly, my life's motto is 'What Would Ted Wheeler Not Do'. Especially when it comes to the woman I marry someday." Naturally, talking about being married someday brings thoughts of El into the forefront of his mind. And then he remembers she's supposed to be calling sometime tonight, that he gets to talk to her before he goes to bed.

So, despite the sadness and disappointment that sit in his stomach

like a lodestone, a kernel of happiness blossoms in his heart, the thought of El filling him with warmth, and Mike feels his lips twitch with the beginnings of a smile that he manages to contain.

But Holly notices and she arches an eyebrow. “Ok, what was *that* smile for?” A slow grin of realization spreads over Holly’s face and Mike almost curses just how fucking perceptive his baby sister is sometimes. “Oh my god, you’re dating someone.” It’s like Holly was looking for a distraction from their parents’ horrible marriage because she throws herself whole-heartedly into the barrage of questions that she launches at him. “Who is she? Where did you meet her? Is she pretty? Does she know how big of a nerd you are? When do I get to meet her?” Holly asks, practically bouncing.

Mike can’t help it – he could use the distraction, too. So he smiles and lets himself think about El. “Her name is El. She’s the guidance counselor at the school I work at. And yes, she knows how big of a nerd I am.” Mike reaches into his pocket. “Here, I’ll show you a picture of her.”

It doesn’t take Mike long to find the picture of El he was looking at just hours earlier as Holly comes over to his side of the kitchen island and he angles the phone so she can look at the screen. “Holy shit, she’s gorgeous,” Holly says. “She’s *way* out of your league, Mikey.” Holly pauses, head tilting at the picture of El, sitting in a makeup chair in a dressing room after getting her makeup done for the Nutcracker. “And what’s she doing in a makeup chair?”

Mike smiles. “Oh, uh, El used to be a ballet dancer when she lived in New York City. She was, like, super famous – toured the world and everything. She was just in the Nutcracker as the Sugar Plum Fairy.”

Holly raises a skeptical eyebrow. “And she’s dating *you*? Wow, what’s wrong with her?”

Mike lightly punches Holly in the shoulder. “Shut up, there’s nothing wrong with El, you brat.”

Holly giggles for a couple of seconds before settling down, smiling up at Mike fondly. “No, seriously, she’s beautiful, Mike. And it looks like she makes you happy.”

Mike smiles, heart full with love and affection, for both El *and* his sister. “She does. And I *am* happy.” He breathes out an incredulous laugh. “I mean, it’s still new and we only started dating, but...I think this could be it, Holly.”

Holly lets out a tiny, high-pitched squeal and claps her hands together. “Ooh, Mom’s gonna *flip* when she finds out. And now I *have* to meet her. When are you bringing her home, Lover Boy, so I can meet her?”

“Not for a while, you goof,” Mike says, giving Holly a look. “When it’s time, you will. And don’t go saying anything to Mom. I’m not ready for her to know yet.”

Holly rolls her eyes. “Fine,” she says with a heavy, long-suffering sigh. “Be that way.”

“I will,” Mike says, chuckling a bit. “Anyway, I’m gonna go take a shower and just hang out in my room. It’s been a long day and I had a long drive to get here.”

“Yeah, I think I’m just gonna curl up with my laptop and watch Netflix or something,” Holly says as they start to move towards the stairs.

Mike and Holly effectively go their separate ways, Holly into her room and Mike into the bathroom to shower. And when he settles into his room, it’s a little after 8PM and a sense of melancholy wistfulness has filled him.

It’s odd, the highs and lows he’s experiencing all at the same time – happiness over him and El sitting alongside the worry, anger, and frustration over what’s happening with his parents. Mike almost doesn’t know which way is up, his emotions are so jumbled.

Mike grabs his laptop and tries to distract himself with mindless internet surfing, bouncing back and forth between Twitter, Tumblr, and Buzzfeed like he’s lost any sort of attention span, like there’s nothing that can hold his interest for more than a few minutes.

Mike knows it’s the anxiety, the worry, the fact that too many things

are going on right at this moment. He feels like a coiled spring, wound too tight, skin buzzing with *something* that leaves him unsettled – like he's just *waiting* for something to happen.

And, at just past 9:30, something *does* happen: his phone rings.

Mike's phone is within arm's reach, but he still fumbles for it regardless, trying to close his laptop and set it aside at the same time as picking up and answering the phone. He manages somehow and he sees El's name flash across the screen before he picks up the call just after the third ring. "El, hi," he says, a little too fast, a little too eager.

El giggles and Mike feels that coiled spring unwind just a little at the sound of her voice. "Hi, did I call at a bad time?"

"No, just...." Mike trails off, laughing a little. "I'm just being an idiot over here."

"Oh, I don't think that's possible," El says, her voice lilting and melodic. There's *something* in her voice that Mike can't quite place, something that makes him want to be physically with her so he can figure it out.

Maybe you just miss her, his brain whispers at him. Which...isn't wrong.

"Glad I have you in my corner," Mike says, grinning, as he picks up his laptop and places it on his nightstand before lying back down on the bed, head cushioned by the pillows while he stretches out on top of the covers.

"Always," El says and Mike swallows at the word, spoken with thick emotion. "Regardless of what our future holds, we were friends first and I will *always* have your back."

Tears spring to Mike's eyes and he blinks rapidly to clear them. "I like the sound of 'always,'" he says, coming as close as he dares to admitting the depth of his feelings.

"Hmm, it is a nice word, isn't it?" El says and Mike can hear the smile in her voice. "Anyway, how was your day? Did you survive your first

dinner back?"

El's question brings back the horrible memories of just a couple of hours ago, of that horribly awkward dinner, and Mike cringes as he lets out a wounded breath. "Oh god, it was *horrible*."

El sucks in a sharp breath and Mike can feel the sympathy radiating from her even at a distance. "Oh, Mike, I'm so sorry."

El's voice, rich and soft and so, so lovely, is a balm for his soul and he *craves* to be near her, wanting to be with her so bad, it physically aches. His need for her has crawled beneath his skin and embedded itself deep inside of him, making Mike feel unsettled, restless. And it's not just a physical need – though that is there too, don't get him wrong – it's a need for *everything*: the sound of her voice, the press of her lips, the warmth of her regard and the way she makes him feel exhilarated and calm all at the same time.

Mike's so in love with her, it makes his head spin and he's *this close* to asking where she is, ditching Indianapolis, and driving as far as he needs to just to be with her *right now*. But, given what happened at dinner, Mike knows there's no way he's going to leave his mom only a handful of days before Christmas.

So he doesn't ask – he *can't*. Knowing where she is right at this moment is a temptation he can ill afford. Instead, Mike just swallows against the emotion that wells inside of him so he can tell her what happened. "My dad didn't come home for dinner. He never called, either, so my mom just obsessed over it all night, getting super drunk to cope. My 18-year old sister had to help her upstairs and get dressed for bed." Mike tries to keep the words as emotionless as possible, but he can hear the tremor in his voice and knows he's failing. "And I just...I miss you. *So much.*"

"I miss you, too," El says, her voice hushed, the words almost a gasp. "God, I can't stop thinking about you. You've turned me into a mess, Mike Wheeler."

Mike grins, almost despite himself; he knows what El's doing, even if she doesn't: she's trying to distract him.

God, he'll take it. He'll take anything she has to offer.

"A mess, huh? Well, that's convenient, since you've pretty much got me turned all upside down, Ms. Hopper."

El lets out a low hum, the sound trailing off into a light giggle. "I just can't *wait* to see you again. I keep replaying in my head everything that happened on Saturday night."

His heart skips a strange beat with the thought that pops into mind and Mike bites his lip to contain himself before he gives voice to it. "Even what happened in the car?" God, even just the thought of what happened in the car is enough to make Mike forget all his problems, all his worries.

And then El lets out a light moan that is indecent with decadence, rich with sensation, and Mike feels the beginnings of desire stirring in his blood, heating him up slowly. "*Especially* what happened in the car," is what El says in response, her voice low and breathy, carried away by the memory. "I love how you touched me, how you made me feel. I can't stop thinking about how much I want to feel that again."

Mike digs the fingers of his free hand into the blanket beneath him, balling up the material into his fist. His heart is racing in his chest, pulse pounding, head swimming with want. He wants to make her feel like that again, over and over. He wants to touch her, kiss her, *love* her. He wants to feel her moving against him, wants to hear her cries, wants the warmth of her body against his, her hands touching him with sinful promise. He just *wants* and he lets himself drown in it.

It's quite a juxtaposition, feeling like this when his evening was so shitty, but he's so happy in this moment, so carried away, that, despite what happened, he doesn't care. Not one bit. Not as he throws himself into what he's feeling, what El makes him feel. So, yeah, maybe he's distracting himself from how bad his night was.

Or maybe he just needs her.

So, when he speaks once more, it's with a voice that is reflective of

everything that he's feeling, one that is low and ragged with need. And he takes a deep breath, preparing himself to take the plunge. "What are you wearing right now?" He's spoken the words in jest a couple of times over the past few days, light and teasing, loving the way she laughs and teases back, neither of them *actually* playing that game.

But he's serious now. *Deadly* serious. And he waits to hear her answer, to see if she's going to play as well.

And she does, letting out a breathy giggle, the sound wrapped around another moan. "That depends. What do you *want* me to be wearing?"

Oh god. Ok, guess we're going there. Mike sits up, limbs trembling. "No, no, I don't think so. That's not how this game is played," he says, getting up to lock his door. He's not about to have this moment interrupted for *anything* and he learned long ago the value of making sure to have his door locked if there was anything remotely sexual going on behind it.

(honestly, it only took one really unfortunate incident with his mom walking in on him jerking off to drive that lesson home with burning clarity, a lesson that all teenage boys learn at some point in their life. it's a lesson he only ignores when he's home at his townhouse in chicago, where he knows he's completely and absolutely alone. and when he has visitors...yeah, the door gets locked.)

"So, how is it played, then?" El asks with false innocence.

Mike tries to picture her as he lays back down, door successfully locked. He imagines the smile on her face, full lips curling up, eyes wide with exaggerated innocence, cheeks flushed with the prettiest pink color.

"Well, we start with what you *are* wearing. No skipping to the end or starting in the middle. It's all about the journey, El."

"I see, very instructive," El says, still so very breathless. "Well, let's see, I'd just gotten out of the shower when I called you, so...." She pauses and Mike waits with bated breath for her to finish. "I'm still *only* wearing a towel."

El's words are like a gut punch and, for a moment, Mike can't breathe as a surge of desire zips down his spine from the base of his neck, settling low in his hips. *Only a towel? Jesus fucking Christ....* Mike gulps against the rapid beat of his heart in his throat. "Well, isn't that convenient," Mike says, his voice ragged.

"Mmm, quite," El says, sounding a little dreamy and swept away. "So tell me, Mike. Tell me what you would do." She pauses, drawing in a shaky, sighing breath as her voice drops to a near whisper. "Tell me how you would touch me."

Mike can't hold back the moan that rumbles low in his chest as his imagination runs away with him, dually fueled by the needy desire in El's voice and the memories from Saturday. How would he touch her? Better question is, how *wouldn't* he? God, he can just picture it and the fantasy takes his breath away.

(he sits on the edge of his bed as el stands in front of him, towel wrapped around her torso, cinching tight above her breasts. her long hair is wet as it cascades down her back and shoulders, skin warm and flushed from her shower. he pulls her towards him, drawing her closer with hands wrapped around her wrists, his knees parting so she can stand between them. she's looking down at him, gaze dark and lidded, lips just barely parted, chest heaving as she draws in deep, steadyng breaths.)

mike releases el's wrists and trails the fingers of one hand up the length of her arm, his other sliding onto her hip to hold her close. her eyes slip shut as his touch rounds the curve of her shoulder, her head tipping just barely so he can trace the lines of her neck and jaw, thumb reaching out to swipe against the fullness of her lips. her lips part even more and he can't help himself as he presses the tip of his thumb between them, groaning as he feels her lips wrap around the digit, sucking lightly while her tongue swipes across the pad of his thumb.

mike licks his lips as he removes his hand from her neck and face, pulling his thumb from her mouth. with just the tips of his first two fingers, mike retraces his path down her neck and shoulder before his fingers lightly sweep in along the length of her collarbone, heading down once he reaches the top of her sternum. el whispers his name, pleading, head tipping back slightly as her back arches, and mike lets his fingers dance along the skin just above where the towel is cinched. the fabric is damp from drying her

off, the terry cloth pulled tight where it's tucked into itself. he reaches the edge of the towel, curls around two fingers, and waits.

el opens her eyes and looks down at him, gaze imploring, need shining darkly in her eyes, pupils blown wide. "what are you waiting for?" she asks, voice a needy whisper.

*"for you to ask, for you to say **please**," he responds, leaning in, face tilting towards her, an inch away from kissing her. "say please, el."*

*el lets out a whimper that shoots straight down mike's spine and she bites down on her lower lip, tongue flashing out to soothe the bite. "please," she says – **begs**. mike lets out a groan that is very nearly a growl as he grips the edge of the towel and **pulls**. the terry cloth comes free and mike moves his other hand so he can let the towel drop to the ground, baring her to his hungry, eager gaze. he drinks in the sight of her, gaze sweeping up and down swaths of bare skin, along the lines of her body, all lush and enticing curves.*

*his hands follow the path laid out by his eyes and later, once he's pulled her even closer towards him, bodies pressed together so that there's no space between them, his mouth follows as well, worshipping her as best he knows how to, leaving no inch of her untouched and unloved, drawing passionate cries and lustful moans from her, the sound like music to his ears. each and every sense is ensnared by **her** – the sounds of her pleasure, the soft glide of her skin beneath his palms, the way she tastes against his lips and tongue, the sight of her arching beneath him. and eventually, **finally**, he lets his body join with hers, lets himself get lost in everything she has to offer, and-)*

*"Mike," El breathes, drawing him away from the fantasy he's been building over the past couple of seconds. He's breathing hard, practically panting, on the verge of losing it as his meager self-control falters. He's never wanted anyone more in his entire life. And he doesn't think he ever will. "Tell me. *Please*." Her voice is needy, beseeching, *desperate*, beckoning him with the promise of *everything* if he would only give her what she wants.*

And so, he does.

After all...how could he resist?

El never realized before that a person's voice could live inside of her, echoing in every beat of her heart, in every tremulous breath.

But, when El wakes up on Thursday morning, she can *feel* Mike's voice inside of her, like it's been tattooed under the surface of her skin. It makes her feel *alive* with the multitude of sensations coursing inside of her, in every nerve and fiber of her being: electrified and soothed at the same time; hot and bothered, yet sated; happy and lovesick and needy and filled with longing.

El turns over in bed, pillow hugged close to her chest as she giggles at the overwhelming feelings running through her. The sheets glide against her bare skin and El blushes as she realizes she's still naked - god, she didn't even have it in her to *get dressed* after her call with Mike ended, she was so swept away.

El closes her eyes and lets memories of the night before float through her mind's eye, her lips curling up in a satisfied yet incredulous smile as she remembers *exactly* what happened.

Because, *holy shit*, last night, she and Mike essentially had phone sex. And it was the most erotic thing she's *ever* experienced.

El never thought of herself as a phone sex kind of person until yesterday. It's not that she's a prude when it comes to sex - she has healthy desires like any other person and isn't ashamed of it. But the idea of telling someone over the phone, so explicitly, how she's feeling, what she wants them to do to her, what she's doing to *herself*, never really appealed to her. Plus, she's not as confident as she'd like to be on her ability to articulate all of that in a way that is sexy and thrilling.

But Mike...Mike doesn't just break all the rules - he's rewritten them *entirely*. He makes her want everything, makes her feel like she can do anything. And, *god*, he turns her on like no one ever has before.

Which is how this all happened, if El's being honest with herself.

It starts when she wakes up Wednesday morning after a night filled with dreams of her and Mike - dreams that involved both of them in bed wearing absolutely no clothing. She wakes up wanting, every inch of her filled with need, skin tight and tingly and *itching* for his touch. Her mind swims with nothing more than ephemeral fragments of the dreams that kept her tossing and turning - the phantom sensation of Mike's hands on her thighs, the sweet sting on his mouth on her neck, the glide of the skin of his chest beneath her palms, the rhythmic shock of his hips meeting hers as they lose themselves in one another.

The heat and depth of her desire barely fade as El goes about her day, but she's able to be an adult about it. She eats breakfast with Hop and Joyce before booking it over to the Hawkins Dance Studio, all while maintaining her composure and managing not to walk around broadcasting to the entire world that she had very powerful and lingering sex dreams the night before.

Sure, she's a little jittery - dropping things here or there, over-balancing a handful of times, getting lost in her own thoughts with a regularity that's becoming alarming - but overall, she's fine. *Just fine.*

But then Mike calls her mid-afternoon and everything just...falls apart.

The sound of his voice in her ear brings memories of her dreams roaring to the forefront of her mind with crystal clear detail. She feels horribly guilty for feeling, well...so turned on when he's just calling her looking for a bit of emotional shoring up before seeing his family, especially because the bits and pieces of what he's shared with her about his family sound just awful.

Still, she can't stop herself from using what she's feeling for him in that moment to distract him. And when he plays along with her seductive teasing before sussing out *what* she's doing, El's heart somehow starts beating even faster, her lungs unable to pull in oxygen fast enough to feed the rapid drumming of her heartbeat.

The call ends not long after that and El lets Mike go so he can face his family, even though she wants - no, *needs* more.

That's when it hits her, standing in the middle of half assembled rows of folding chairs inside Hawkins' Dance Studio, the idea making her squirm and blush with an intensity that feels searingly permanent.

She might not be able to seduce him in person, but that doesn't mean she can't do it over the phone. And, from how Mike responded to just the slightest bit of teasing over the phone, there's a really good chance he'll play along if she tries.

(besides, what guy would turn down phone sex? wasn't that, like, a fantasy every guy had?)

The rest of the day, El is a jittery, nervous, *excited* mess. Looking back at it the morning after, El's surprised she made it through the day somewhat coherently, given how almost all of her mental energy was focused on what would happen once she was by herself, behind the locked door of her bedroom.

After dinner, with her excitement cresting to nearly unbearable levels, El knows she needs to do something to calm down if she's going to be able to carry out this plan. So, a little before 9, El decides to take a long shower. She stands under the warm spray, taking her time to scrub her skin and shave her legs, finding the action meditative as she breathes deeply, lungs filling with warm, steam-filled air.

After, she pads her way silently back to her room, dressed only in a towel, trying to think about what to wear, about how to set the mood. But, half a second later, El's hit with the mental image of just how Mike would act if he were here, if he were waiting for her room and she walked in wearing a towel and nothing but a towel.

(mike looking at her, wide eyed, flush high on his cheeks, eagerness shining in his eyes. el approaches him and that eagerness works its way down to his hands as he reaches for her, tugging lightly on the towel so that it falls to the floor around her feet, leaving her bare in front of him. then his hands are on her and el lets herself get lost in his touch, warm and thrilling and, god, she just needs him like she's never needed anybody before.)

So, suddenly breathless at the fantasies her brain was spinning, El

decides to stay wearing only the towel. Making sure the door is closed and locked behind her, El grabs her cell phone, plugging in her headphones with the microphone on them so she can keep her hands free for whatever is about to happen - *god, she hopes she's not about to make a fool of herself, that he'll go with her on this journey she suddenly and very desperately wants to go on.*

She calls him then, hands trembling, blood racing, anticipation making her skin itch. And when Mike picks up, El isn't able to keep what she's feeling, the need and excitement and sheer want, out of her voice. She's been afraid she's being super obvious, that Mike is going to see what she is trying to do from a mile away.

If he does, it's not obvious. But then she asks him about how dinner was and the answer he gives nearly breaks her heart and El knows in that moment that she would do *anything* to make him feel better, to give him something happier to focus on.

So, El lets everything she's feeling carry her away, letting him know how much she misses him while she begs, *fucking begs* for him to tell her what he wanted.

So, he does. *God*, how he does. With a voice that sends shivers down El's spine with how low and ragged and *needy* it is, Mike describes just what he would do if he were there with her, how he would touch her and kiss her and *be* with her.

And El is lost, swept away by the sensations Mike sparks inside of her, his words stoking the flames of her desire until all she can think of, all she is, is Mike and his voice and the rich images he paints for her, images that leave her breathless and aching for more.

God, the things he tells her - from how he wants to touch her, to how beautiful she is, to how much he wants her - a naturally gifted storyteller, Mike has a way with words and he uses that talent to full effect as he makes her feel like the most cherished and desired woman on the face of the planet.

Like she's the marionette to Mike's puppeteer, her hands are the conduits for his words, mirroring and simulating what he's describing - explicit without being crass, rich with detail, and so very seductive -

like his touch is transmitted by his voice to her fingertips.

Mike drives her to heights she's never experienced before - her breath coming in harsh pants, every inch of her skin hot and tingling, body arching as every muscle goes taut while pure and overwhelming pleasure explodes along every nerve, his name leaving from her lips in a desperate gasp, his voice echoing her desperation with a low groan of *her* name.

God, Mike's not even in the same *city* as her, never mind the same room and he can still affect her like this. It makes El wonder what it'll be like when they sleep together for real, if Mike can carry out the promises of the words he whispered so seductively in her ear.

Because, *holy shit*, if he can execute on *half* of what he described to her? El's not entirely sure she won't melt into a puddle of goo when they finally do sleep together.

Because they will sleep together.

They *have* to.

El might die of sheer frustration if they *don't*.

But that's a concern for another day, another time. El has things she needs to get done and she needs to get out of bed in order to do them.

So, El pushes herself from bed with a wistful sigh, but nothing can take away the smile that stretches up her lips, filled with the memories of last night and hopes, *dreams* for the future. It's a knowing smile, filled with the knowledge of the way Mike's fantasized about her, about the way he wants to be with her, about how he *feels* about her, even if on a physical level at the very least. It's a smile that's empowered and coy and secretive, all at once.

Everything feels *richer* today, like there's a whole world of sensation that had been locked away until this moment, until Mike Wheeler came into her life and upended everything. It's like a spell's been wrapped around her, a warm luxurious spell that El is loathe to break. So, she takes her time getting ready for the day, almost afraid

that any sudden movements will break the magic that's surrounding her.

There's an extra sway to her hips, a certain lilt to the cadence of her steps as she walks downstairs to where Hop and Joyce are having breakfast and El feels like the most powerful woman in the world.

(she wonders how badly she's broadcasting how she feels, if everyone will be able to know just by looking at her what she and mike did last night. it also makes her wonder how she'll feel once they actually sleep together, if she'll feel just as powerful and beautiful as she does right now...if she'll feel more.)

Hop spots her first and he gives her a small, if sleepy smile as he sips at his coffee. "Morning, sweetheart. Sleep well?"

The question feels like a loaded one, even if El knows it's not - it's just a polite question, no special meaning behind it - and El finds herself fighting off a blush. *He doesn't know, there's no way.* "Yeah, slept well enough," El says as she works her way into the kitchen. "Is there still coffee left?"

"Should be half a pot," Joyce says. "Unless this one here drank it all when I wasn't looking," she continues, jerking her thumb over in Hop's direction.

Hop rolls his eyes. "Really? Is that something I'd do?"

"Yes," Joyce and El say at the same time, exchanging knowing smiles with each other as they laugh.

"Great, ok, I see how this goes," Hop says. "I see what you *really* think of me."

El grabs a mug out of the cupboard and spares half a glance over her shoulder. "You know we love you, Dad."

"Uh-huh, *sure,*" Hop says, smirking. "I really believe you."

"Oh, stop being such a drama queen," Joyce says as she leans over to give her husband a kiss on the cheek before standing up. "El, there's some scrambled eggs and toast on the counter, if you want also."

El smiles over at Joyce as she pours her coffee. “That sounds great.”

“Great, I’ll fix you a plate,” Joyce says and, for a couple of moments, there’s only the sounds of Joyce and El bustling around the kitchen, moving around each other as El prepares her coffee and Joyce fills a plate with food.

“So, what do you have going on today, El?” Joyce asks as they sit back down.

“Mostly costume fittings for the pageant,” El says. “They’re all made, I just need to make sure what adjustments still need to be made. And, if there’s time, I think Ms. Trainor - ugh, *Jodie*, stupid old habits - wants to do a dress rehearsal.”

“Sounds like that’ll keep you busy for most of the day,” Hop says.

“It should,” El says before she looks over at Joyce. “When do the boys get home?”

“Jonathan should be home mid-morning,” Joyce says. “His flight lands in about an hour in Indianapolis. And Will and Greg will be here late afternoon - Will texted me to say that they would be leaving around lunch time.” She pauses, giving El a questioning look. “You will be home this evening, right? For the tree decorating?”

It’s a family tradition that spans all the way back to those first years of living together as a family - waiting until everyone was home to decorate the Christmas tree, which is currently sitting out on the front porch in anticipation of being brought inside and adorned with tinsel, lights, and ornaments.

El gives Joyce a fond smile. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” The smile that Joyce gives El in return warms her heart and it makes El glad that Joyce is in her life, that her dad had another chance at love with this amazing woman sitting next to her at the kitchen table.

Breakfast goes on quietly from there - light chatter around the table that generally devolves into Joyce and El teasing Hop for something or other, or *just because* - and, not much longer later, El’s out the front door, bundled up against the cold.

She gets in her car and, while she's waiting for her car to heat up, El pulls her phone out of her purse to check it. She smiles when she sees the notifications on her screen - a missed call from Mike from a couple of minutes ago and a follow-up text message that reads: *did you bring your laptop home?*

Curious and beyond intrigued, El opts to call him back instead of texting. Her heart does its normal rapid pitter-patter at the thought of Mike, and it's especially strong in light of last night. She feels almost breathless as she waits for Mike to pick up the phone. And when he does, he greets her with a simple "Hey", the word soft and spoken with a voice that is full of emotion. After last night, with the knowledge of what that voice can do to her, El can't help but shiver, barely holding back the longing sigh that bubbles in her chest.

"Hi," El says, unable to keep from giggling. She feels like a silly, lovesick girl instead of a grown woman, but she doesn't care. Not one bit. "Sorry I missed your call a bit ago. I was in the process of walking out the front door."

Mike lets out a low laugh that sends even more shivers down El's spine, her body beginning to warm at the sound. "So, what I'm hearing you say is that you're not naked anymore."

El bites her lip. "Well, it's not exactly socially appropriate to walk around nude."

"Aww, says who?"

"The penal code," El says, shaking her head with amusement. "Besides, it's freezing outside. I'd die from hypothermia if I walked around naked."

"Hmm, I suppose you have a good point," Mike says. "Still, a guy can wish, can't he?"

El laughs. "What am I going to do with you?"

Without missing a beat, Mike says, "Do you really want me to answer that question? Because I think it might just be a repeat of last night's conversation."

“Hmm, last night,” El says with a sigh, letting the memories wash over her. “Last night was....” El trails off, almost at a loss for words. “I’ve never done anything like that before.”

“Me neither,” Mike says. “But I’m glad it was with you.” He pauses, letting out a low chuckle. “I didn’t know I had it in me, to be honest. But hearing you, knowing what you were doing? I’ve never wanted to be with anyone more in my entire life. And I just...god, I want to see you. And not just in a sexual way, either. Just...I miss you.”

El leans back against the headrest of the driver’s seat and sighs. “I miss you, too.” She grins half a moment later and reaches up to twirl a lock of hair around her index finger. “Is that why you asked about my computer?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Mike says with a laugh. “I wanted to set up a video chat of some kind and I wanted to know if you brought your laptop home with you.”

“You know, we could FaceTime over the phone,” El says, teasingly.

“Yeah, well,” Mike says and El can practically hear the way he’s rolling his eyes. “The screens on our phones are tiny and, well, I just....”

El takes pity on him and speaks before he can start to ramble. “I understand, Mike. And, yeah, I brought my laptop with me. I mean, how else am I supposed to watch Netflix?”

“Fair enough,” Mike says. “I’ll figure something out and let you know before we talk tonight.”

“Can’t wait,” El says, sparing a moment to glance at the clock on the dashboard. “I need to get going, though. I have about 25 costumes to finalize and fit today and the sooner I get it done, the sooner I can get back home.”

“Ooh, sounds fun,” Mike says, dry and sarcastic. “I’ll talk to you tonight, then, yeah?”

“Yeah,” El says, lips pulling up in a cheeky grin. “Any requests on what I should be wearing?” she asks, her tone breathy and flirtatious

and only mostly joking.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Hopper,” Mike says, groaning.

El giggles. “Ooh, that sounded stern. Am I going to be punished?” She knows she’s being cruel, teasing him like this - really, it’s cruel to *both* of them, flirting like this while they’re so far apart, unable to be with each other - but El just can’t help herself.

“Ok, that’s it, I’m hanging up now,” Mike says, tone tight. “You’re trying to give me a heart attack over here.”

El laughs. “Ok, ok, I’ll stop. I’ll talk to you later, Mike.”

“Bye, El.”

El hangs up the call, sighing as she does so. For a moment, she just sits, head pressed against the headrest, eyes slipped shut, her thoughts filled with *Mike*.

God, she misses him. And she can’t *wait* to see him again.

El lets herself wallow in everything she’s feeling – how much she cares about Mike, how excited she is to talk to him, to *see* him later... how much she misses him – but reality presses in and there’s only so much longer El can sit there before someone comes out to see why she’s just sitting in her car with it running.

So, El slips her phone back in her purse and backs out of the driveway to head to downtown Hawkins. At least she has something to distract her today.

Even if that “something” is 25 hyper-active kids and trying to get them to sit still long enough for costume fittings.

It’s a good thing El knows her way around a sewing machine, or just a needle and thread. Years of ad hoc costume modifications and on-the-spot fixes have given her a certain craftiness when it comes to

fabric and clothing.

Because, miracle of miracles, El gets all the kids fitted for costumes *and* gives Jodie enough time to run the kids through a dress rehearsal, all before 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

And El's feeling *triumphant*.

"I don't know how you did it, getting all those costumes done as well as you did, but I'm impressed," Jodie Trainer says, blowing a strand of blonde hair out of her face. She's maybe 15 years older than El and a few inches taller, blonde hair barely streaked with pale silver strands.

The two of them are cleaning up after rehearsal, the kids long gone, ushered out by tired parents caught up in the holiday frenzy, and El smiles over at Jodie. "I have a lot of experience with altering costumes," she says. "Tricks of the trade, I suppose you could say."

"Well, however you came about it, you're a godsend, El Hopper," Jodie says as she picks up a few last pieces of trash scattered around the room at the dance studio. "Seriously, I don't know how I keep managing to convince you to help out, but I hope whatever lapse of judgment that keeps you agreeing continues until I retire."

El's finishing up straightening the chairs she set up yesterday for the audience and she gives Jodie another smile as she heads over. "Hey, it's not so bad. Plus, they're pretty cute in their little costumes. Especially the 4-5 year olds. They're just precious."

Jodie grins as the two of them go to grab their things. "You want some of your own, someday?"

Before El can stop herself, images of tiny children with dark curly hair and freckles dance through her mind's eye, all curious smiles and twinkling eyes. Not just her children – her and *Mike's* children.

Her heartbeat does a curious skip, a gasp-inducing rattle, and El finds herself blushing as a deep longing fills her. Children had always been something abstract, a far-off desire that lived where all her other "somedays" lived. But now...now she wants *everything* with Mike –

there's no denying it anymore. A home, family, children – she wants it all. Is it too soon to be having these thoughts? Probably. But her heart doesn't care.

El knows she's not hiding anything when the smile on Jodie's face turns fondly amused. "Or, would a better question be, is there someone you want to have them *with*?" Jodie asks.

El lets out a breathy giggle and tries to clear the cobwebs from her mind, but to little avail. "I think there might be," El says. "It's early, still, but...have you ever been with someone and just *known*? That they were it for you?"

Jodie reaches out and gives El's shoulder a light squeeze. "I haven't been that lucky when it comes to love, but I know what you're talking about. And I'm happy for you. Is he someone you met in Chicago?"

El sighs as she shucks on her jacket, her scarf already firmly wrapped around her neck. "He's actually someone I work with, one of the science teachers at school."

"Ooh, a smart one. Those are always good," Jodie says as she puts on her own jacket.

"He's one of the good ones, that's for sure," El says while she reaches into her purse for her keys. She and Jodie begin making their way out of the dance studio, Jodie turning off lights and locking up as they go.

"Well, I'm glad," Jodie says. "You deserve to be happy."

El grins, despite the cold air that slams into her face as she walks outside. "Thanks, he makes me happy."

Jodie gives her one last smile as she stops in front of her car, parked in the tiny lot by the studio. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow, yeah? Only one more day of this and then we're free!"

El can't help but laugh as she unlocks her own car. "Have a good night, Jodie."

“You too, El.”

The drive home is quiet, music from a Top 40 station lightly playing from the speakers, and El lets the scant distance give her the space to breathe. Because the revelation that Jodie’s question sparked inside of her has left her a little rattled. Sure, she knew she’s been falling in love with Mike for the past few months. But she wasn’t aware her heart was already at the “forever and ever” stage until that very moment. And, though El’s not backing down for anything, it’s still a little scary, how all-in she is, and she wonders if she isn’t moving a little too fast.

Like you’d be able to slow things down to save your life, a corner of her brain whispers and El knows it to be true. She’s head-over-heels in love with Mike Wheeler and it’s way too late to stop now.

El can only hope Mike feels the same way about her.

El’s still thinking about this as she drives up to the house, still thinking and hoping and praying, but the sight of a strange car in the driveway distracts El from her mini-existential crisis. *Jon’s home*.

It’s been *too long* since she last saw Jonathan, especially as she went from seeing him on a regular basis to seeing him *not at all* once she moved to Chicago from New York. So El finds herself practically vibrating with excitement as she all but launches herself from the car and up the porch stairs.

“I’m home!” she announces as she shuts the door behind her. “Jon? Is that your rental parked out front?” Really, it has to be – Joyce’s car and Hop’s police cruiser are both missing, so they’re still at work – but it never hurts to be sure.

“Who else would it be?” Jonathan calls out from near the den and El drops her purse on the coffee table as she sees Jon standing up from the couch, a huge grin on his face as he approaches her.

El throws herself at Jon, wrapping her arms around him a tight hug. “Oh, you know, it could have been a serial killer or something,” El says, sighing at the feel of Jon hugging her back.

“A serial killer, huh?” Jon says as they separate. “And yet you walked inside blindly? Such a New Yorker.”

El sticks out her tongue at him as she takes off her jacket. “Oh, please, give me a little credit. It’s called ‘deductive reasoning skills’. I’m not an idiot, you know.”

Jon rolls his eyes as he turns back to the couch. “Yeah, yeah. Forgot that cop skills were an inherited family trait.”

El swats him on the arm as she follows, plopping down next to him on the couch. “What are you watching?”

Jon shrugs and hands her the remote. “Nothing in particular. Just channel surfing as a way to relieve boredom and travel fatigue.”

El gives her brother a stern look, one eyebrow arched pointedly. “Travel fatigue?” she repeats. “JB, come on, it’s a 3 hour flight and a 1 hour drive. How fatigued can you be?”

Jon blushes at the use of the nickname (El grins – *mission accomplished*). “Gimme a break,” he says, nudging her with his elbow. “A long day of travel is when I have to cross into a different borough.”

“You homebody,” El says as she begins mindlessly flipping through the channels. “So, how’s everything going? The Times still grossly underpaying you?”

“They don’t *grossly* underpay me,” Jon says under his breath. “They just a little underpay me. But I’m actually looking at a job at Time Magazine, as one of their lead photographers. A friend recommended me for the position, put in a good word with my potential boss.”

El’s jaw drops open even as the beginnings of a smile are tugging up the corners of her lips. “Jon, that’s awesome! Have you interviewed yet? Did you give them your portfolio? Oh, I’m sure you’re going to get it. You *have* to. You’re so talented, I can’t imagine that—”

Jon holds up a hand, laughing a bit shyly. “Jeez, calm down there, Ellie. They have my portfolio and I’m supposed to go in for an interview after Christmas. And, yeah, I have a pretty good shot, but

there's no guarantees, as I'm sure you know."

Mollified, El gives Jon a gentle smile. "Well, I'll keep my fingers crossed for you. But you're gonna get it, I *know* it." In all her channel surfing, she lands on a nature documentary of some kind, so she stops flipping through the channels and sets the remote down on the end table.

"Yeah, well, we'll see," Jon says before he nudges her again, this time with his knee. "How about you? How's Chicago treating you? You and Will getting up to no good without me there to police the two of you?"

El rolls her eyes and sighs. "Oh, please, like you ever had to 'police' the two of us. Besides, he and I are both busy and don't have a lot of time to see each other. So we couldn't get up to no good even if we wanted to."

Jon looks over at her, brow furrowed in confusion. "But I thought you guys had brunch every weekend."

"We do," El says with a smile. "But he's got art gallery stuff, and I have work *plus* dancing after school, so brunch is about the only time we *do* see each other."

"Gotcha," Jon says, nodding. "Speaking of your job, that going well?"

"It's so good, Jon," El says, sighing wistfully. "I love helping these kids and my co-workers are great and it's such an amazing school. Totally worth changing careers for."

"Good, that's great. I'd worried about what you were going to do after you couldn't dance anymore – I know there's a time limit on that kind of career – so it's good you found something you love that doesn't require you to be in peak physical form."

"A good point," El says. "Still...there's part of me that misses the City, you know? Like, remember that corner deli by your senior year apartment? When I first moved out and we were living together?"

Jon lets out a groan. "That place had the *best* sandwiches, I swear...."

The TV drones on in the background while El and Jon reminisce and catch up. Yes, they talk on the phone on a somewhat regular basis – once every couple of weeks, or so – but it's different seeing him in person, where they can bounce off each other like they normally do, where she can read his facial expressions and see the joy in his eyes, the teasing quirk of his smile.

It goes on like this for a little while, about an hour or so, when the front door opens and a voice calls out. “Hey, what kind of establishment are you running here? Where's the bellhop?”

El shares a quick look with Jon, grinning at the amused exasperation reflected back at her, before she gets up from the couch. “Oh my god, you are seriously the *biggest* brat ever, William!” she shouts as she makes her way from the den towards the front door, all smiles the entire time.

Will's standing in the front hall, Greg right behind him, a bundle of bags by their feet between them as they shuck off jackets and scarves. Greg, ever the gentleman, closes the door behind them to keep the warm air from escaping out of the house. “Well, look who it is? If it isn't Hawkins' favorite prima ballerina.” Will teases.

El rolls her eyes. “Oh, please, like you didn't just see me 5 days ago,” she says with a sigh, giving him a hug before turning to Greg. “And, look, my brother's much better half.”

“Hey!” Will says before he turns to greet Jon, the two brothers embracing while El focuses on Greg. He's a gorgeous man, Will's partner – tall, sandy blond hair, chiseled good looks, always somehow looking like he just stepped out from a GQ photo shoot – but he's also the sweetest person ever and El loves him like he's family. Because he practically is, by this point.

“Hey, El, how are you?” Greg asks as he scoops her up in a warm hug.

“Not bad, not bad,” she says as she hugs him back, her arms trying to wrap around his broad shoulders. “How was the drive?”

“Not so bad,” Will answers. “I mean, it's pretty boring, but at least it

was uneventful.”

Greg gives Will a wry look. “Speak for yourself, Mr. I Slept The Whole Way Home.”

Will has at least the good grace to blush, even as he turns to Greg and gives him an airy glare. “Hey, I offered to drive and you said *no*.”

“That’s because your driving ability gives me heart palpitations,” Greg says. “Makes me wonder how they teach you kids out here in farm country.”

Will guffaws. “Oh my god, I *dare* you to say that to Hop when he gets home.”

Greg raises a curious, hesitant eyebrow. “Ok, should I be afraid to ask why?”

Jon’s mouth curls up in a quiet, amused smile. “Hop taught both Will and El how to drive.” He looks down at the collection of bags on the floor. “Here, I’ll help you guys get your stuff upstairs.”

“Thanks,” Greg breathes out before he rolls his eyes, shooting Will a playful glare. “Love how you’re trying to get me in trouble with your cop step-dad, by the way,” he says as the starts heading up the stairs with Jon.

“Love you, boo!” Will calls out.

“Also, it’s just Will who’s a horrible driver. I’m great behind the wheel,” El tacks on, smiling as she hears Jon and Greg laugh while Will lets out a petulant noise.

“You’re so mean to me,” Will whines as they move into the kitchen.

El watches as Will reaches into the fridge and grabs a few beers – *good thing we stocked up*. “You ass, you know I love you.”

“Whatever you say, *Janie*,” Will says with a roll of his eyes. “You want a beer?”

“Nah, I’ll have wine,” El says as she goes to where she stashed a few

bottles of her favorite red wine.

Jon and Greg come down a minute later and, soon, all four of them are sitting around the table, beer in hand (or glass of wine in El's case), laughing and talking and just spending time together.

This is how Hop and Joyce find them when they get home a little over an hour later, the four young adults on their second drink, happy and laughing, enjoying each other's company.

El lets herself get swept up in the joy of family as the evening proceeds to be filled with decorating the Christmas tree, the entire Hopper-Byers clan crowding in the living room while Greg offers to cook dinner.

("I want you to be part of tree decorating," is what Will says in protest after Greg offers to cook dinner.

"You all haven't spent time together in months. I'll be fine on my own for half an hour. Go hang out as a family and I'll be out once dinner is mostly done." Greg then gives Will a long, lingering kiss before shoving him in the direction of the living room, everyone else pretending like they're not happily spying on them.)

Hop and Jon are in the middle of untangling Christmas lights so Joyce can loop them around the tree when Will leans over the box of ornaments he and El are sorting, his voice a conspiratorial whisper. "Have you told them about this guy you're seeing?"

El flushes as she glares at Will. "No, I haven't!" she hisses. "And you're not going to say anything, either, ok? I think Joyce and Dad suspect something, but that's all they do and I don't want to confirm it for them."

Will just gives her a look. "I wasn't going to say anything, ok? I was just curious. I mean, it's probably best *not* to say anything, you know?"

The unspoken message behind Will's words hits El like a dagger to the heart. "What's that supposed to mean? Are you saying I'm going to screw this up?" El glances over her shoulder to the rest of her

family to see if they've noticed the heated discussion taking place in hushed whispers just feet from them, but the others are still too concerned with the lights to pay attention.

Will pinches his lips and sucks in a deep, tight breath. "That's not what I'm saying," he says. "I'm just worried about you, ok? I don't want you getting hurt, is all."

And, just like that, the hurt and anger that had been building up completely dissipates. El gives Will a small, soft smile. "I know you don't, and I appreciate it. But this guy, Will...you don't even know him. You don't know how good, how nice and sweet he is, ok?" She takes in a deep breath. "Do you trust me?"

Will's brow furrows. "Of course I do."

"Then believe me when I say that this one is special. It's still pretty new, which is why I don't want to say anything. We haven't even gone on our official first date yet."

At this, Will lets out a low laugh. "You and that stupid first date checklist."

El reaches out and jabs Will in the ribcage with her finger, giggling as he squirms away from her touch. "It's not stupid. It's perfect, ok?"

Will's laugh builds a bit in volume as he reaches into the box to continue sorting through ornaments. "Right, ok. It's perfect. Sorry to have doubted you, my queen."

"Glad you've seen the error of your ways," El says with an airy sniff even though she's trying not to smile. She sobers a bit and gives Will a small grin. "Thanks, by the way, for not saying anything to Dad and Joyce."

Will smiles. "No problem."

El refocuses on sorting through the ornaments with a sigh, relieved that her secret will be a secret for a little while longer. The longer she can put off having to go through the rigmarole of her family asking nosy questions, the better.

So, naturally, this is when Greg walks in, drink in hand, and says, “So, El, Will tells me you’re seeing someone?”

El can *feel* the moment everyone’s gaze snaps onto her and her shoulders slump in defeat. Next to her, Will just *loses it*, sucking in a deep, shocked gasp before he practically explodes with laughter. “Oh my god,” he gasps out. “I’m sorry, I swear I didn’t set that up, but *holy shit*, the timing!”

El glares at Will before looking over at Greg, who’s staring back at her with guilt creeping up into his eyes. “I take it you hadn’t actually told anyone yet,” Greg says, cheeks staining with an embarrassed blush.

El gives him a tired, resigned smile. *Guess the cat’s out of the bag now....* “Nope, not yet.” She sucks in a deep breath and looks at the rest of her family, who are staring back with curious eager gazes. “Ok, fine, ask your questions,” she says, bracing herself for the barrage about to come her way, knowing she can’t stop what’s about to happen.

And they mean well, El knows this, even as she bristles a bit under the intensity of the looks she’s getting. *They just care about you and they’re curious*, she tries to remind herself and it helps calm her down.

Besides, just because they ask her questions...doesn’t mean she has to *answer* all of them, now does she?

El somehow manages to answer the questions while being as evasive as possible, keeping as many of the private details to herself while she tells her family *something*.

El’s proud of herself for straddling that thin line, all said and done. And, though she’s exhausted from the mental and verbal gymnastics she’s had to perform over the course of the evening – the questions lasted throughout dinner and *everyone* wanted to know about El’s mysterious new boyfriend – she’s happy, her mind filled with

thoughts of Mike as she gives vague answers to the questions that her family peppers her with.

And, by the end of the dinner, she's not just eager to talk to Mike – she *needs* to talk to him like she needs air. So, she stands up from the table, mostly empty dinner plate in hand, and gives everyone a smile. “It’s been a long day, so I think I’m just going to head up for the night.”

Joyce gives her a concerned look. “Everything ok, sweetheart?” There are reflections of the look Joyce is giving her from the rest of the family and El tries to look reassuring. Will and her dad, especially, are giving her pointedly concerned looks and El’s not sure she likes what either of those looks mean.

“Yeah, I’m fine, I promise. I’m just tired.” El takes her plate over to the counter and heads back to the table, giving Hop and Joyce quick kisses on the cheek. “Night, everyone.”

El makes her way upstairs and, when she’s in her room, she leans against her shut door as she releases a tight breath, relaxing for what feels like the first time in the past few hours. After a moment, a second to breathe, El grabs her phone off her nightstand.

A quick glance at the screen shows her that Mike hasn’t texted her since she plugged her phone in to charge - he’s probably been busy with family like she’s been - so El doesn’t think anything of the silence from him as she sends him a quick text. *Hey, you free to talk?*

El stares at the screen for a couple of seconds to see if Mike will get back to her right away. But, there’s no three little dots indicating that he’s typing back, so El sets her phone aside and flops back onto her bed with a sigh. He’ll get back to her when he sees her message. Of that, El has no doubt.

But, if El can’t talk to Mike right now, there’s nothing else she wants to do besides lay here and stare up at the ceiling.

Well, might as well get comfy before I settle in to stare at nothing.

So, El pushes herself up and goes over to her dresser, where she’d put

all the clothes she brought with her from home. She's not going to lie; ever since Mike told her he wanted to talk over a video call, she's been thinking all day about what she wants to wear, how she wants to look. And, after a bunch of waffling and going back and forth, she decides on simple and cute, but also a little sexy: face scrubbed mostly clean with just a little bit of lip gloss and mascara, a cute cream-colored silk camisole with delicate lace along the low v-neck, and a pair of somewhat matching pale green sleep shorts that fall quite a bit short of reaching the middle of her thighs.

El's just finished changing and has just grabbed a face wipe to remove the day's dirt and makeup when a knock at her door freezes her in place for half a second. "Come in," El calls out as she sits near the foot of her bed, one leg folded beneath her.

The door opens and Hop's face appears in the gap between the open door and the frame. "Hi, Ellie. Mind if I come in for a sec?"

El shrugs and scoots all the way over so she can sit cross-legged on the bed. "Sure, Dad. What's up?" She drags the face wipe quickly across her skin as she watches her dad walk into the room, closing the door behind him.

Jim Hopper is a big man and he makes El's room feel *tiny*. El wonders if he's actually aware of just how imposing he really is. It also hits her that Mike is the same height as her dad, which almost makes her cringe for reasons she doesn't want to look too closely at.

Hop goes over to El's old desk and sits down on the chair in front of it. "Honey, are you ok?"

El's brow furrows. *Oookay, where is this coming from?* "Yeah, Dad, I'm fine. Why?"

"You just seemed really different at dinner when everyone was asking you about this new guy of yours and I wanted to make sure you weren't pissed off or anything."

El lets out a strangled sigh, even though she's smiling a little. One, it's touching that her dad is concerned about this and two, her dad's face has the usual lemon pucker it normally does when he tries to

talk to her about her love life. “No, I’m not pissed off. A little exasperated, maybe, but not angry. I might be a little annoyed at Will who *very clearly* has no faith in my relationships-”

“To be fair,” Hop says, cutting her off. “You really haven’t had the best run of things in that department.”

El shoots her dad a wide eyed glare. “*Anyway,*” she says maybe a little sharper than intended. “It’s just still really new and I don’t want to jinx it by telling you guys *everything*. So that’s why I was being really vague and cagey about this guy.” El sighs and looks down at her lap, her teeth worrying on the inside of her lip. “I just really want this one to work out, Dad.” She looks back up at Hop to see him giving her a soft, supportive look. “I *really* like him and I think this could really be something.”

Hop smiles. “Does he make you happy?”

This time, El can’t keep the blush from creeping up her cheeks. “He does, Dad. He’s one of the best people I’ve ever met and he’s so sweet.”

Hop sighs as he gets to his feet, going to her so he can lean over and press a kiss to her forehead. El’s eyes slip shut and she leans in to the warmth of her dad’s affection, her whole being filled with how much she loves him. “As long as you’re happy and he treats you right, that’s all that matters,” Hop says as he pulls away, looking down at her. “And if he hurts you-”

“I know, I know,” El says with a roll of her eyes. “He’ll have to answer to you.”

Hop barks out a laugh. “No, you use what I taught you to make him pay. I’ll just be there as backup and to cheer you on as you kick the crap out of him.”

El laughs as her dad heads for her door. “Ok, sounds fair. Night, Daddy.”

Hop gives her a smile over his shoulder as he grabs on to the doorknob, opening the door enough for him to slip out. “Night, El.”

And then it's just El in her room, alone once again. Sighing fondly - her dad's such a trip and she loves him so very much - El finishes going about getting ready for her video call: applying a light layer of lip gloss, sweeping a bit of mascara across her lashes, and brushing her hair so it shines.

She's almost finished brushing her hair when she hears her cell phone buzz with an incoming text message and the speed at which El rushes to grab her phone makes her glad she's by herself. Because it's seriously *really* embarrassing how desperate she is right at this moment, how badly she wants to talk to Mike...how much she misses him.

Mike's text message is a link and a simple set of instructions for her to follow on her laptop, so El quickly finishes brushing her hair and locks her door (she really doesn't want to be interrupted) before hurriedly setting up her computer.

Mike's instructions are easy to follow and as the video call initializes, El grabs her headphones and plugs them into her laptop - the walls aren't exactly thick in this house and she *really* doesn't want anyone knowing she's talking to Mike on video chat. Plus, her laptop's speakers are crappy and she wants to hear his voice as best she can.

With trembling hands, El waits for the call to finish connecting, heart racing with anticipation. And when the image appears, El swears her heart actually *stops*.

Because there, on her screen, is Mike. And he's *beautiful*. He's looking off to his right, arm stretched out to grab or do something as he sits up in bed, so El's first glance of him is in profile. A gasp sticks in her throat as she drinks in the sight of him - the angle of his jaw; the sweep of his cheekbone with pale freckles splashed across the skin; the length of his neck, tendons standing out beneath his skin as he turns his head; his hair disheveled from the day, ends curling just a little. He's wearing what looks like a faded, navy t-shirt, the fabric clinging to his shoulders in a way that makes El's mouth water.

God, he's so beautiful, it makes her heart hurt.

And she's so happy to see him, her lips stretching upward in a smile

that feels too big for her face. “Hey, there,” she says, soft and gentle, unable to keep the quiet intimacy out of her voice.

But it’s clear Mike didn’t know she had finished connecting the call, so the sound of her voice startles him, causing him to overbalance, his laptop tilting and wobbling dangerously. There’s a bunch of flailing and a few muffled curses as Mike attempts to right himself.

El can’t help it: she breaks out into giggles, her hand coming up to press the back of it against her mouth to contain the noise as best she can.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” El says after a couple of moments, when it looks like Mike’s mostly gotten things under control.

“Somehow, I doubt the sincerity of that, Little Miss Giggles,” Mike says with an exaggerated roll of his eyes before he sobers a bit and actually *looks* at her. El’s giggles die down as she watches him look back at her, his face softening, gaze filling with an exquisite combination of awe and attraction and relief. “Hi,” he says, with almost hushed reverence. “God, you’re a sight for sore eyes.”

Overwhelmed, blush creeping up her cheeks, El ducks her head, one hand coming up to tuck her hair behind one ear. “Charmer.”

“Not my fault you’re insanely gorgeous,” Mike says with such aplomb, it sounds like he’s stating a simple fact of the universe rather than his incredibly biased opinion.

El looks back up to meet his gaze and smiles softly. “I miss you.”

Mike returns her smile and El feels her heart skip a beat. “I miss you, too. But, hey, we can actually see each other now, which is an improvement. How were my instructions for setting this up on your end? Good?”

“Yeah,” El says with a nod. “Really easy. Thanks for doing that.”

Mike blushes and it’s so cute El almost reaches out to touch the image of him on her screen. But she doesn’t because she’s not a total weirdo. “No problem,” he says. “And, I mean, it was kind of a selfish bit on my part, too. It’s been *days* since I’ve seen you and I didn’t

want to go any longer.”

“I can’t wait until we’re both home,” El says. “And then I can see you while you take me out on our first date.”

The look Mike gives her - an eye roll followed by a flat, incredulous look - makes her laugh. “Seriously, what do I need to do to convince you that we already *had* our first date?”

“Nope, not how this goes,” El says, shaking her head.

Mike arches an eyebrow. “Is this a girl thing? Like, part of the weird torture ritual you put guys through to see how well we can jump through hoops?”

El grins, teasing. “Darn,” she says with a snap of her fingers. “You’ve seen through all my plans. Whatever will I do?”

Mike laughs, face lighting up in amusement. It’s a good look on him, happy and free and El wants to do whatever it takes to keep him looking just like this.

But, before she can keep going, the sound of someone knocking loudly at her door breaks through the sound of Mike laughing in her ears and El rolls her eyes. “Hold on a second, someone’s at my door.” El tugs the headphones out of her ears and slides off her bed, feet silently padding on the carpet as she walks over to her door.

El unlocks it and opens it enough so she can see who’s there. It’s Will and El braces her forearm against the wall by the doorframe. “What is it?” she asks, blocking his view of her room with her body.

Will bites his lip, looking a little contrite. “Hey, you got a second?”

El heaves a sigh. “No, I’m a little busy right now. Can we talk tomorrow?”

Will’s lips twitch in a short-lived smirk, but the mild amusement lingers on his face. “Talking with your new boytoy?”

“Hmm, you know, I don’t think he’d appreciate being called a boytoy,” El says, eyebrow arching. “And I’m not sure I appreciate it,

either.”

Will cringes. “Sorry, sorry, I was just teasing. Well, um, I’ll let you get back to talking to him, then. And we’ll talk tomorrow?”

El smiles, her annoyance fading. “Yeah, definitely. G’night.”

“Night, Janie,” Will says quietly, smiling before he turns away.

El closes the door with a small shake of her head, fondly exasperated, and heads back over to her bed, where her laptop is sitting on the rumpled blanket. “Sorry, about that,” El says as she slips her headphones back in. “How much of that did you hear?”

Mike arches an eyebrow. “Um, none of it? All I really heard were muffled voices and it was really faint. Who was at your door?”

“Just my brother, wanting to talk,” El says. “Long story short, my whole family knows about you and me and my brother is, shall we say, less than confident my ability to hold down a relationship.”

“Well, that’s just rude,” Mike says with a small frown.

El sighs. “A little, but it’s not like it’s completely out of the blue, or anything. I haven’t exactly had the best luck in the past with relationships. But I’m hoping this will turn out to be different.”

Mike smiles, soft and reassuring and hopeful, and El feels a thousand butterflies take flight in her stomach, gossamer wings brushing against the inside of her skin. “It will, I know it. This is...I’ve never felt anything like this.”

El smiles, looking down at the screen. “Me neither,” she admits. “I know this is probably really a little soon, and I probably shouldn’t be saying this, but I hope this never ends. I hope we never end.”

“Me, too,” Mike breathes. “And I don’t care that it’s too soon to be saying it, because I feel the same.”

“Good,” El says, sighing with something akin to relief.

This is the moment that El’s neck makes it known that it’s not going

to be happy with her constantly looking down like this and she lets out *another* sigh, this one a little frustrated. “Not to completely ruin the mood but, hold on a sec, will you? I’m gonna rearrange over here.”

“Ok, whatever you need to be comfortable,” Mike says as El grabs hold of her laptop and starts to scoot back towards her headboard-

-Only to have her laptop jerk in her hands as the charging cable catches on something towards the bottom of her bed. “Ugh, cable’s caught. Hold on,” El says, frustration building even more. She sets her laptop back down on the bed and leans over to figure out what’s going on. “Sorry about this.”

“Oh, um,” Mike says, voice suddenly rough. “No problem? I mean, you’re *totally* gifting me with a look down your shirt, so I’m not exactly complaining, or anything....”

El freezes and looks down to see that, yes, with the way she’s leaning over her laptop, the neckline of her camisole is gaping open and the camera is pointed directly down her shirt. Her skin warms - both out of a little bit of embarrassment *and* that Mike is probably (*most definitely*) staring at her bare breasts right now - and she makes no attempt to move. “Enjoying the view?” she asks, feeling coy, waiting to hear his answer before she resumes what she was doing.

Mike lets out a breathless, almost manic laugh. “I - is there a way to answer that question without sounding like a total creep?”

El giggles. “I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want you to be enjoying this so, yes, yes there is.”

El’s ears fill with the sound of Mike’s strangled groan. “God, I’m torn between wanting to make you laugh again - because *holy shit*, that’s hot - and not, because I didn’t sign up to be tortured like this.”

El feels a sense of pride wash over her, pride that Mike likes how she looks under her clothes, but there’s also only so long she can stay like this without it getting really awkward, so she hurries to finish what she’s doing, tugging the cable out from where it got trapped between the mattress and box spring before she sits back down. “Well, just so

you know, I didn't have plans to accidentally flash you."

Mike gives her a *look* and El shivers at the heat in his gaze, evident even through the screen. His lips pull up in a grin. "Oh, so did you have plans to *purposefully* flash me?"

Well, she *hadn't*, but now that he's said it.... "Maybe," El grins, scooting back so Mike can see more of her, so he can see her hands moving to play with the hem of her camisole. "Tell me, Mike, did you want me to take off my top?"

El tries not to laugh at the way Mike's eyes bug out for a split second before he manages to get himself under some semblance of control. "Hmm, I don't know. Doesn't seem fair. I mean, what do you get in return?" There's no way El can miss the way his voice has pitched low, the husky tenor resonating in her ears.

El bites her lip as she fingers the fabric of her top. Even though Mike's trying to be glib, she takes the question seriously...a question she knows the answer to - she gets Mike looking at her like she's the most amazing woman he's ever seen, like there's no one else he ever wants to look at...she gets to feel powerful and desirable and beautiful all at the same time. And, suddenly, this is all she wants. *Right now.*

In the end, El doesn't voice her answer.

No, instead, she gently removes her headphones, placing them next to her, before she wraps her fingers back around the hem of her camisole and slowly lifts it up over her head. The entire time, she watches Mike's face, watches the way he goes still, lips parting with a combination of shock and rapt attention, his cheeks flushing under the light of his screen. She only loses sight of him when the fabric pulls over her head and she wishes she could hear if he made a noise in reaction to the sight of her suddenly naked torso.

And when she looks back at him after shaking her hair free from her camisole, the fabric still gathered delicately in one loose fist, her heart thumps in her chest and her fingers tremble with excitement as she grabs the earbud with the microphone attached to it, slipping it back in her ear.

Because Mike is looking at her like he can't believe she's real, like she's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen...like he wants to *devour* her.

"So," El says, all but breathing the word. "What do you think?" The question is just about the biggest understatement for the gravity of the moment, for the way her pulse races and skin tingles, for the complex dance of emotions playing out on Mike's face and in her heart.

Mike's gaze dances over her upper body and she can hear him struggling to get control of his breathing as he takes everything in she's offering. He never stares at any one thing for long - though he does linger on the sight of her breasts when his gaze passes over them. El feels his eyes on her like a physical caress and she can't help the way she shivers in response, goosebumps breaking out along her skin.

And, just before the silence goes on for too long, Mike lets out a ragged sigh. "Fuck, you have *no* idea how beautiful you are, do you?"

El lets out a sighing giggle. "You sure do know how to flatter a girl, don't you?"

"I've never been more serious about anything in my entire life," Mike says. "I don't know how I got so lucky that you chose me, but...*holy shit*, am I grateful." He says this, eyes on her face the entire time, even though his voice is tight and she *knows* where he wants to be looking. And even though El wouldn't mind if he was staring at her chest - she *did* take off her top voluntarily, after all - her heart warms with the realization that he's not just with her because he's physically attracted to her.

It's still really nice, though, to know that he's also physically attracted to her, given how a second after he finishes speaking, his gaze drifts down once more, lingering on her chest for a few seconds in a way that makes El really wish he was here with her right now, so he could do more than just look. "Want me to leave my shirt off?" El asks, grinning as Mike's eyes snap back up to look her in the eye.

"Again," Mike says, returning her grin with a weak smile of his own.

“How do I answer that question without sounding like a total creep?”

El lifts the camisole she’s still holding and presses it against her chest, mostly covering her breasts, before she shifts once more, moving so she can lay on her side. She props her head up with her other hand and makes sure her camisole is draped just so before reaching out to angle the screen so she and Mike can better see each other. “There, partially covered, but still easily removable for when you make up your mind how many clothes you want me to be wearing.”

There’s a strangled sound that comes from Mike’s end and El lets out a giggle. “Jesus, I think you laying down like that might be *worse*,” Mike says with a groan. “You’re *really* not helping me right now.”

“This is doing it for you, huh?” El asks with a wink.

“A combination of *that* plus the fact that I can’t *do* anything about it right now.”

El laughs. “Well, not with *me*, you can’t,” she says, her tone teasing and full of suggestion.

“Ha, ha, very funny,” Mike says, giving her a look.

“Well, if it makes you feel better, you can take *your* shirt off, too, even the playing field.” El pauses, biting her lip. “I like you without a shirt on.”

“You know,” Mike says with a weak laugh. “This wasn’t why I suggested doing a video call.”

El shrugs. “Well, we’re here now. So, chop-chop, that shirt’s not gonna take itself off.”

Mike gives her a look that is both amused and exasperated, maybe a little nervous, as he reaches behind him to pull his shirt up and over his head. “There, you happy?”

The screen on his end is angled just right for El to be able to see the upper half of his torso and she grins as it’s her turn to check him out. Her own gaze dances over his shoulders and chest, taking in the taut skin and lean muscle, shoulders peppered with more pale freckles,

and El just wants to *touch*, her fingers itching to trace the lines of his torso. “Mmm, very,” El says. “Anyone ever tell you you’re really hot?”

Mike snorts, rolling his eyes, but El can see him blush, can see the way he glances at her like he so desperately wants to believe her. “Please, I’m lucky if someone thinks I’m just mildly attractive.”

“Well, everyone else’s loss is my gain,” El says, her voice going fondly soft. “Because I am *incredibly* attracted to you.” And she will make it her life’s mission to make him *feel* it.

“You are, huh?” Mike asks, breathing out a quiet, self-deprecating laugh.

“Absolutely,” El says. “You really do it for me, you know. Like, I-have-inappropriate-kinds-of-dreams level of doing it for me.”

At that, Mike grins, the expression a little smug, if incredulously so. “Hold on, I think I need you to give me all the details. And I need to be lying down first.” El waits, watching as the camera shifts while Mike lays down, mirroring her position, and she bites back a groan as she watches the muscles of his arm and shoulder shift while he props up his head. Holy shit, she wants to trace the lines of his bicep and shoulder with her lips, wants to nibble on his skin with her teeth before soothing it with her tongue.

God, she wants him so badly.

“There,” Mike says a second later. “Alright, lay it on me.”

El giggles. “My, what a fortuitous choice of words....”

They talk for what feels like *hours*, sharing dreams and fantasies, their conversation littered with giggles and sighs, everything happy and flirty, thrilling yet filling them with a sense of peace. Because nothing has ever felt more right in their entire lives and nothing ever will as they stare at each other through the screens of their computers, drinking in the sight of each other, just happy to be able to gaze at one another.

(el removes her shirt once more, right before they end the call, claiming

that it's a "parting gift". she wishes him sweet dreams, winking suggestively, and mike just laughs as they hang up the call, his eyes flashing with a heat that el feels down to her toes. yeah, el knows with a certainty that makes her smile what he's going to be dreaming about. mostly because she's going to be dreaming about him, too, dreaming about running her hands up his arms and shoulders, about feeling the skin of his chest beneath her palms, about the heat of him soaking into her as they lay skin to skin. and she can't wait to be with him for real.

because, someday, they're not just going to have to look and dream.

*no, someday **real soon**, they're going to be able to do more.*

*someday, they're going to be able to do **everything**.)*

Mike never knew that the words “sweet dreams” could be a curse as well as a blessing. But when he wakes up for good on the Friday morning before Christmas, he knows this to be true.

His dreams last night were all of El, filled with vivid images of him and El wearing absolutely no clothing, doing the kinds of things to each other that they’d talked about on their call last night. The dreams aren’t unusual, per se - he’s been having erotic dreams about El since practically the moment he met her, though she’s graduated from being one member of a rotating cast (hey, he’s only human) to being the central and only star.

But his dreams last night were...*especially* vivid, primarily fueled by the fact that, *holy shit*, he know what she looks like half naked (now he has a visual aid to go with the knowledge of what it feels to touch her there and he *desperately* wants to be able to look *and* touch at the same time).

Mike hadn’t been lying when he said last night that them talking topless was not the reason he suggested doing a video call. Really, it was just that he wanted to see her.

After she'd startled him while he was trying to arrange a couple things on his nightstand and he got his first good look at her, Mike swears his heart had stuttered painfully in his chest at the sight of her, looking all fresh faced and adorably sexy, wearing a thin, off-white camisole, neckline dipping in a low V, showing off the sweep of her collarbones and the skin of her upper chest.

He'd nearly had a heart attack when she stood up to answer the knock at her door and he got a glimpse of the tiny, sleep shorts she was wearing, the material showing off the length of her thigh, barely even covering her ass, and Mike couldn't help but imagining running his hands up her thighs, letting his fingers dip beneath the hem of those shorts to see what she felt like *there*.

But nothing could prepare him for when El accidentally gave him a look down her shirt as she leaned over her laptop. His mouth had gone dry, skin buzzing with the sudden onrush of desire, at the sight that filled his screen. With her shirt gaping open like that, Mike had been able to see the entire top half of her breasts and he'd never wanted so badly to be able to reach out through the screen to the other side in his entire life.

And when she, after a bit of back and forth teasing, sat back and removed her top?

Well, Mike had practically died and gone to heaven.

El is *breathtaking* and Mike couldn't stop his eyes from roving over her form, drinking in the sight of the svelte curves and lines of her naked torso, the unbroken expanse of smooth, soft, *touchable* skin. He couldn't help but linger on her breasts (*was there any part of her that wasn't perfect? that wasn't absolutely exquisite and irresistibly beautiful?*) and the way his heart pounded, the way his blood raced hot in his veins, making his skin feel too tight, had him suddenly on edge.

He'd been on edge for the rest of the call, desire thrumming through every inch of him and Mike did nothing to temper the feeling. He let it live in every breath, every word, in the smile on his face and the beat of his heart.

So it was no wonder his dreams had been filled with her, vivid

dreams that felt temptingly real. He'd woken up twice from those dreams, wanting in a way that drove him to seek relief from his own hand (never mind that he'd had to do the same *before* he could even fall asleep, need filling him with an urgency that was almost painful).

God, he feels like a teenager again, all hair-trigger libido and endless need, and Mike's starting to get a sense that he's always going to want El, that his body is never going to be able to get enough of her.

Mike can't even bring himself to feel embarrassed about touching himself to the thought of her - he had in the beginning of their friendship, but as it seemed increasingly likely that they were destined to be more than friends, his embarrassment vanished like smoke in the wind.

It's with thoughts and visions of El swimming in his mind's eye that he pushes himself from bed to take a shower (a nice, long shower where he lets himself get lost in thoughts of her *again*, this time aided by the slickness of the water that runs over his body and washes away all evidence of what he's doing).

It's almost mid-morning when he finally makes his way downstairs, the house quiet except for the soft sounds of choral Christmas music wafting through the air.

His mom is sitting at the kitchen island, mug with steam billowing out of the top next to her on the counter, while she reads something on her phone. Only the angle and distance Karen's holding the phone at looks ridiculous and Mike shakes his head with incredulous amusement.

"Mom, we talked about this," Mike says that in lieu of a morning greeting. "It's ok to admit that you need reading glasses."

Karen looks over at Mike, clicking her tongue at him, wry grin pulling at the corners of her mouth. "Reading glasses make me look old, Michael," she says with mock primness.

Mike snorts. "No, you holding your phone like it's going to bite you, like someone in their 80s does, is what makes you look old." He heads for the coffee station on the kitchen counter, where there's a

partially filled pot of coffee sitting on the warming plate.

“Don’t mock your mother,” Karen says and, even though Mike has his back turned to her while he fixes his coffee, he can hear the smile in her voice and it, in turn, makes *him* smile.

It’s nice to hear his mom happy and Mike wishes there was a way to keep her feeling like this. He knows it’s because yesterday was a good day - Ted *actually* came home for dinner, even though he’d been mostly silent during the meal. Still, it was enough for Karen to help keep up appearances, Mike supposes, and he also wishes there was a way to make his mom happy *without* going through the farce of pretending that his parents’ marriage hadn’t completely disintegrated years ago.

But, Mike doesn’t want to say any of this, so he turns around a second later, stirring in half and half into his coffee, with a cheeky smile on his face. “Sorry,” he says with a half-assed little shrug.

Karen rolls her eyes at him, but keeps on smiling, so Mike’s going to take it as a victory. “Yes, you sound very sorry, I’m very convinced.”

Mike lets out a low laugh before he sips at his coffee. “Where’s Holly?” He’s not going to ask about his dad; Mike knows where he is. Even though today is a federal holiday (since Christmas Eve falls on a Saturday), Ted Wheeler is a fixture of the office, more dedicated to his fucking job than the Postal Service. *He’s going to work in that job until he keels over at his desk. Because retirement is for quitters and Ted Wheeler is not a quitter*, Mike thinks with dark humor.

“Oh, she went out ice skating with a few of her high school friends and-” Karen’s phone chimes with an incoming text message and Mike watches as she reads it, letting out a frustrated scoff as she does so. “Oh, that child!” Karen says, huffing a sigh.

Mike raises an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“I told Nancy to let me know when she landed so I could pick her up at the airport, but she just texted me to let me know that she caught one of those Uber things and is on her way home. I mean, *honestly*.”

"I'm sure she just didn't want to inconvenience you," Mike says, coming over to sit by his mom at the kitchen island.

"No, more like your older sister is stubbornly independent," Karen says flatly before she looks over at Mike. "Well, if I can't help one of my kids, doesn't mean I can't help the others. You want me to whip you up a quick breakfast?"

For a second, Mike almost says no, that he can forage on his own. But the look his mom is giving him is desperately hopeful and Mike realizes that his mom just wants someone to need her, someone she can care for. So, Mike gives her a smile and nods. "Yeah, Mom, sounds great. I'm, um, not sure what I'm in the mood for, but whatever you make will be fantastic, I'm sure of it."

Karen reaches out and lightly cups Mike's cheek in a fond, wistful gesture. Karen's fingers are soft, but a little cold against Mike's face, like her hands have always been. He finds himself suddenly transported back to his childhood by the simple touch, when she would comfort him and hold him if he'd had a bad dream or a bad day at school, murmuring softly, "My beautiful boy." The memory is like a punch to the heart and Mike has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from tearing up.

If Karen notices the play of emotions across his face, she gives no indication as she smiles softly. "You're such a sweet boy, Michael," she says before she slides off the barstool she's perched on and begins bustling around the kitchen. The air soon fills with the smell of cooking and it's not long until Mike has a plate filled with French Toast, eggs, and a couple pieces of bacon. Mike lets his mom dote and fawn over him, mostly because it seems to make her really happy, but also a little because he loves his mom and there's something comforting about luxuriating in the nostalgia of being treated like a child again.

Once he's finished eating, Mike migrates over to the family room and sprawls out on the couch while he searches for something to watch on TV. He eventually lands on "Die Hard" - which is only the *best* Christmas movie known to man - and quickly gets drawn into the action filled exploits of John McClane....

Or he does until a voice behind him pulls him back to the real world. “Wow, my nerdy little brother, camped out in front of the TV. Are we still in high school or something?”

Mike grins, face almost hurting from the force of his smile. *Nancy.* “What, you prefer me holed up in my room, doing god knows what behind closed doors?”

Mike gets off the couch and turns in time to see Nancy shuddering, face screwing up in a look of disgust. “Ugh, gross. You didn’t need to make this a sex thing, you know.”

“Of course I did,” Mike says. “Because you react like *that*, like you’re about to throw up.”

Nancy rolls her eyes. “Brat.”

“Princess.” Mike goes over to Nancy as she moves into the family room, the two of them meeting in a tight hug. Nancy is *tiny*, barely coming up to Mike’s collarbone. But she hugs him with a strength that belies her size. Still, Mike grins with mischief. “Wow, hugging you is like hugging a child.”

Nancy’s arms band tightly around his rib cage, almost suffocatingly so. “And hugging you is like hugging a beanpole, but you don’t see *me* complaining.”

“Nancy, I can’t breathe,” Mike wheezes through the iron band of Nancy’s arms around his torso.

Nancy lets go and pulls away just a bit, stepping back so she can look up at him. “Sorry,” she says, smiling impishly.

Mike looks down at her, seeing if she’s the same or different from the last time he saw her. Her hair’s still short, just above her shoulders, but it’s more of a shaggy, barely tamed mess of curls than the sleek bob she was trying to tame it into over the summer. The faintest beginnings of age lines are creeping into her face - the corners of her eyes, laugh lines around her mouth - but her face and the look in her eyes is still youthful, still sparkling. *She looks good, happy.* “Jeez, Nancy, you start lifting weights, or something?” Mike asks, cringing

dramatically.

“CrossFit, actually,” Nancy says as she pushes past him to plop down onto the couch. “Ooh, ‘Die Hard’. I love this movie.”

Mike sits next to her, arms loosely folded across his chest. “Only the best Christmas movie ever made.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Nancy says, grinning over at him. “I think ‘Christmas Story’ gives it a run for its money.”

Mike scoffs. “*Please.* ‘Christmas Story’ *wishes* it was as good as ‘Die Hard’ and that’s just the facts.”

“If you say so,” Nancy says with a roll of her eyes, kicking him lightly in the thigh.

Mike returns the volley with an equally light jab of his elbow in her side. “I’m right and you know it.”

“Ugh, *nerd*,” Nancy says with a heaved sigh.

“Damn straight,” Mike says. *Besides, El loves that I’m a nerd*, Mike thinks with a smug smile.

Nancy narrows her eyes at him. “What’s that smile for?”

Mike can hear their mom bustling around nearby and he shakes his head, not wanting to tell Nancy about El in case his mom is eavesdropping. “Nothing, I’ll tell you later.” He shifts on the couch so he’s facing her. “So, how’s working for the illustrious Time Magazine,” he says, waggling his fingers dramatically.

Nancy nudges him again with her foot, a little harder this time. “I don’t know why you have to say it like that.”

“Um, because it’s what you called it for *months* after you got a job there?” Mike says with a scoff. “I’m just quoting you.”

“Ugh, whatever,” Nancy says, sighing. “It’s good, though. They’re sending me to China on assignment for a month at the end of January, to write a story about the impact of tourism on the rising

middle class.”

“Hmm, sounds fascinating,” Mike says, trying to feign some sort of interest (even if traveling for assignment does sound pretty cool), but he really could care less about international socio-economics.

“Yeah, yeah, I know - not your kind of nerdy,” Nancy says. “But it’ll be cool to go back to China.”

“It’s cool that your job pays for you to travel and stay overseas,” Mike says.

“Yeah, it is pretty cool,” Nancy says. “How about you, though? How’s teaching and your writing?”

With the movie in the background, Mike answers the question and the conversation continues from there, the two oldest Wheeler siblings flitting from topic to topic as the mood strikes them. Mike talks to Nancy every other week on the phone, but it’s different talking to her in person, where they can read each other’s facial expressions and riff off each other more naturally.

Maybe 45 minutes have passed - which go by in the blink of an eye, Mike *swears* - when Karen pops into the family room. “I’m going to run a few errands. You guys want me to pick anything up?” When Nancy and Mike both shake their heads, Karen gives them a small, exasperated smile. “Well, I’ll be back in a few hours. Your sister will probably be home soon, so keep an ear out for her.”

“Mom,” Nancy says around a giggle. “She’s 18, not 5. She doesn’t need us to watch out for her.”

Karen pinches her lips and, before she can say anything, Mike cuts in to head off whatever argument is about to break out between mother and daughter. “It’s fine, Mom. We’ll keep an eye out for her.”

Karen sighs. “Thanks, Mike. Alright, I’ll be back,” she says before she whirls away, leaving behind a cloud of hairspray and Chanel No. 5.

Nancy waits until Karen is out of sight before she turns towards Mike, lips set in a thin line. “I don’t know why you always coddle her like that,” Nancy says, her voice low.

Mike sighs, the sound tight and strangled. “Look, she’s been having a tough few days. Dad’s being worse than usual.” He pauses, gulping. “Holly essentially had to *carry* her upstairs a couple of nights ago, she was so drunk. So I just...want to survive the holidays, ok? I don’t think we need to have any kind of explosive drama during what should be a family time of year.”

Nancy lets out a bitter scoff. “Family time, right. They haven’t been a family since you and I were little. It’s why you shouldn’t feed into her worries. She needs to learn to deal when people push back. She needs to learn to let go and stop bottling things up all the time.”

“And I don’t disagree,” Mike says. “Just not during Christmas, ok? Promise me you’ll try to keep things civil. *Please*, Nancy.”

Nancy purses her lips, thinking, her gaze going a bit steely. But, a breath later, Nancy’s shoulders slump and her faces relaxes into a frown. “Fine, ok, yes, I promise. But this isn’t fair to her, you know.”

“I know. I sometimes think she’s going to accidentally kill herself with alcohol poisoning one of these days. And it’ll be for nothing because Dad’s *never* going to change,” Mike says. “And we can figure out how to start getting her out of this house and away from him. But just not during the holidays.”

“That’s fair,” Nancy says with a nod. “It’s just really sad, you know? That they’re in this loveless marriage, wasting away.”

“Yeah, I know,” Mike says. A somber mood settles over them and they settle back into the couch to watch the last half hour of “Die Hard”.

The credits are just rolling on the film when a loud voice pierces through the mood that clings to both Nancy and Mike, cutting through it like a finely honed knife. “Well, well, well, if it isn’t my two, much less talented older siblings,” Holly says as she bursts in the room, cheeks flushed pink from coming in out of the cold. She walks to the couch and positions herself to sit between Mike and Nancy. “Scoot over, bitches,” she says before she plops down, partially sitting on both Mike and Nancy, who do, indeed, scoot out of the way so she can sit flat on the couch.

Holly leans over and gives Nancy a sideways hug. “Hi Nancy,” Holly says, voice going soft.

“Hey, Holls,” Nancy says, wrapping her arm around Holly’s shoulder to hug her close.

“Whatcha guys watching?” Holly asks, leaning back to sit up straight, snuggling into the cushions as she folds her legs in front of her.

“Just finished watching ‘Die Hard,’ ” Mike says as he reaches for the remote.

“Aww, bummer, I love that movie,” Holly says. There’s a long pause before Holly speaks again, voice light and breezy. “So, Nancy, has Mike told you about his girlfriend yet?”

Mike’s thumb freezes over the channel selection button on the remote and he feels the way the room freezes as Nancy slowly leans over so she can look past Holly to Mike. “No, no he did not.” Mike chances a glance over at his older sister, who’s smiling over at him with a mischievousness that sends a shiver of fear down his spine. “Michael,” she says archly, asking with the simple utterance of his name to *fucking spill*.

Mike sets down the remote and sighs. “Thanks, Holly,” he says, giving her a flat, heavy look fueled by his annoyance.

Holly flashes him a sweet smile. “You’re welcome, Mikey.”

“Mike, now.”

Holly waves an excited hand in the air. “Ooh, ooh, show Nancy her picture!” Holly turns towards Nancy. “She’s fucking gorgeous, Nance. Like, *way* out of his league.”

“Hey!” Mike says, even as he’s digging out his phone to show Nancy El’s picture. “I’m right here, you know.” Mike unlocks his phone and begins hunting down El’s picture. “Her name’s El. She works at the same school as the guidance counselor. That’s how we met.”

“Ooh, an office romance,” Nancy says, tone light and teasing. “How scandalous, baby brother.”

Mike rolls his eyes as he lands on the photo of El from when she was getting ready backstage for the Nutcracker. “Here, this is her,” he says as he passes the phone over to Nancy.

Nancy takes it and lets out a soft cooing noise. “Wow, she’s beautiful!” She looks over at Mike, eyes sparkling with humor. “Clearly you got this photo off the internet, or something. I don’t believe you landed a girl this pretty.”

Mike feels a fierce, frustrated blush explode on his cheeks. “Well, I’ll prove it to you!” Mike says, knowing that Nancy’s just successfully provoked him and equally not caring one fucking bit. He brings up El’s contact in his phone and presses the button for a FaceTime call.

There’s a bit of an awkward pause while Mike waits for El to pick up, but she does a few rings into the call. His screen fills with the sight of her and, for a moment, everything fades except for *her*. Her hair’s pulled up in a ponytail, a few wisps escaping to frame her face, and her cheeks are lightly flushed and she looks so beautiful, Mike’s heart almost can’t take it. Will he ever stop being blown away by her?

He hopes the answer to that question is a resounding “NO”.

“Mike, hi!” El says, mouth pulling up into a smile before she bites her lip in confusion. “Everything ok?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mike says, all his earlier annoyance dissipating. “I just, uh....”

Nancy reaches out and grabs Mike’s phone. “Hi! El, right?”

“Um...yes?” Mike hears El say and he goes to lunge for Nancy to grab the phone, but Holly shoves him before sitting on his stomach, using her weight to hold him down.

“So, Mike tells me you’re his girlfriend. Can you confirm or deny that statement?” Nancy asks, cheeks dimpling with the force of her grin.

“Nancy!” Mike whines as he tries to get out from underneath the way Holly’s pinning him down before he decides to just roll off the couch, bringing Holly down to the floor with him with a sharp yelp.

El's laugh comes through the phone. "Yes, I am Mike's girlfriend," she says. "I take it you're the older sister?"

"Yes, I'm Nancy. I'm sure he's told you *nothing* about me. Mike's notoriously tight lipped that way," Nancy says as Mike scrambles to get back up to the couch, crawling over Holly to do so.

"Just that you're a talented journalist and that you live in New York," El says.

"Gimme that!" Mike says as Nancy lets out another cooing noise.

"Aww, what a sweet brother I have. He thinks I'm talented!" Nancy says just as Mike reaches for the phone, yanking it from Nancy's grasp as she lets out a soft "hey!".

"Sorry about that, El," Mike says when he looks into the screen once more.

El's face is lit up with amusement, eyes sparkling even through the screen. "It's ok, I could use the break anyway."

"I wanna see!" Holly whines as she positions herself to peer over Mike's shoulder. "Hi, I'm Holly! I hate to break it to you, but you're way too pretty for my brother."

Mike groans, his head tipping back. "Oh my god, I hate my sisters so much right now."

But El just giggles. "Hi Holly, nice to meet you. But agree to disagree about being too pretty for Mike, yeah? I think I'm just right for him."

Mike's heart gives a strange, fluttering skip and a gasp sticks in his throat. *She thinks she's just right for him!* Mike can't remember the last time he was this happy.

"Aww, I think you broke his brain," Nancy says, poking Mike in the cheek, breaking the spell that's weaving through his brain.

"God, shut *up*, Nancy," Mike mumbles before he focuses on El. "We should let you get back to what you're doing. Still helping out for that recital, yes?"

El lets out a groan. "Yes," she says. "I'm done after today, though. The recital's tonight."

"Well, I'll let you go so you can get back to work. Talk to you later tonight?"

El winks at him, right cheek dimpling with the force of her smile. "Count on it. Talk to you later. Bye, Mike."

Mike smiles, feeling the warmth she creates in him spread throughout his chest. "Bye, El."

El blows him a kiss before she hangs up, disappearing from his screen. Mike puts his phone away and glares at both of his sisters, who are sitting side by side on the couch with almost identical, shit-eating grins. "I hate both of you so much, you know that? You're both dead to me."

"She seems sweet, Mike," Nancy says, completely ignoring Mike's dramatic statement. "Even if she is too pretty for you."

"I like her," Holly says. "When are we gonna meet her, Mike?"

Mike arches an eyebrow. "After the shit you two just pulled? I'm thinking...never."

"Aww, you're no fun," Holly says.

"Well, you're not going to be able to hide her from us forever, Mike," Nancy says. "Not when you're as stupidly in love with her as you are."

Oh god, is it that obvious? A low thrum of panic courses in Mike's veins - he hopes it's not super obvious, *especially* to El. Because he's not ready to share this with her yet, not when everything is still really new, despite the flavor of the conversations they've been having over the phone the past few days.

But, at the same time, there's an excitement running through him. Because *he's in love* with the woman who just admitted out loud that she's his girlfriend, the woman who takes his breath away just by *being*, and it's the most amazing feeling in the world.

“Wow, you really are gone, aren’t you?” Holly asks fondly despite the teasing words.

Mike shrugs, knowing his sisters see right through him, that there’s no denying it any more. “I am, Holly. I really am.”

Nancy smiles, reaching out to lay a hand on Mike’s forearm. “Tell me about her. I want to know *everything*.”

Mike complies, smiling the entire time, feeling so in love he feels like he’s going to explode.

And he’s *never* been happier.

The recital goes off without a hitch and El spends the entire time standing in the back of the audience, cell phone clutched close to her chest, firing off text message after text message at Mike as she watches the kids perform with pride. That she had any small part in making this happen, this adorable, precious performance, makes her feel all warm and fuzzy inside. *This* is why she does this, why she comes back home to Hawkins well before Christmas. It’s the same feeling she gets when she helps her students, or watches them master a difficult dance move.

It’s the joy of helping others and it’s addicting.

Her conversation with Mike later that night is happy and flirty. She’s buoyant from the joy of the evening, almost euphorically happy, and it feeds into every inch of the call she has with Mike, the two of them perched on their respective beds while they talk through their laptops.

Mike’s face is too adorable as El teases him about his sisters (though they both seem like nice people and El can’t wait to meet them in person), and he promises her payback when it comes time to introduce him to her brothers. For a moment, El frowns - god, she’s never thought about Mike interacting with her brothers before and

now she's suddenly afraid. Not of Jon meeting Mike; no, El thinks that'll be fine. Jon's pretty level-headed and civil and won't do anything too much to make Mike feel uncomfortable.

But Will...well, *that's* a different story all together. El tries to imagine how it'll go when she introduces Mike to Will and she hopes, *prays*, that Will can rein in some of his more sarcastic parts of his personality. Will has a dry, cracking wit where a sense of humor should be and he's a master at snarky, underhanded comments (which, El has to admit, Mike is pretty good at that, too...in fact, almost all of the guys in El's life have that same kind of irreverent sense of humor and sarcastic wit and she's including Lucas and Dustin in that group as well. Huh, makes a girl wonder....).

Really, El just wants Mike to get along with her family, because she's almost 100% positive that Mike is *The One*, her one person, the man she's going to spend the rest of her life with. And it would be a shame if her family-to-be was effectively split into two.

But, that's a worry for another day and, right now, El just wants to focus on the man whose face fills the screen of her laptop.

The conversation soon moves on from family and Mike and El dive into a long debate about Christmas movies and which ones are the best for a variety of reasons. The debate ends when, after a bit of bickering back and forth, El comes out with a trade. "I'll take my shirt off if you admit that 'Miracle on 34th Street' is the ultimate Christmas movie."

A grin stretches up across Mike's lips and eagerness flashes in his eyes. "Trying to win using your feminine wiles? I'll allow it."

The rest of their talk devolves from there, becoming a *different* kind of heated and El almost gives in to the desire to put on something of a show, to touch herself for him while he watches, but El can't quite bring herself to do that. No, there are somethings she wants to save for when they're together again, so she holds off.

But she still removes her shirt anyway and doesn't at all miss the little gasp followed by a soft, contented sigh that Mike lets out when she's bared to him once more.

“Ok, you win,” is what he says when she removes her shirt. “I feel like I’ve given you a weapon to be used against me at any time and I’m not at all convinced you’re going to use it fairly.”

El scoffs. “Please, you’re a guy with heterosexual leanings. Breasts are just about the most irresistible things on the face of the planet.”

“Mmm, true,” Mike says, his gaze flicking down to look at the body parts in question. “Now, how do I make you laugh....?” And, funnily enough, that makes El break out into giggles and the back and forth continues, light and teasing with just a hint of heat and desire in every word.

The call ends not long after that and El goes to bed with a smile on her face, even though she misses Mike terribly. *Two weeks to go*, she reminds herself not long before sleep takes her. She can last that long. She knows it.

The next day is Christmas Eve and El lets herself be consumed by family traditions. El knows a lot of families place importance on Christmas Day itself, but Christmas Eve has *always* been where it’s at for the Hopper-Byers clan, since Hop and Joyce got married and the families started cohabitating. There’s Christmas Eve brunch, where Joyce makes Belgian waffles for everyone (woman mostly can’t cook worth a damn but, *oh my god*, her waffles are *to die for*. It was definitely one of the ways Joyce won El over in the beginning, given how much El loves waffles. Not that she wouldn’t have loved Joyce eventually, but the waffles definitely helped speed along that process).

Then there’s board games and hot cocoa that eventually ends up being spiked with whiskey or bourbon, the laughter and good-natured teasing accompanied by the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree. And then, finally, there’s presents and Christmas Eve dinner, which Will and El cook together this year, an almost traditional Christmas roast that leaves everyone stuffed and a little intoxicated from the wine and beer consumed with dinner.

El goes up to her room, happy and mildly drunk, and her conversation with Mike that night is soft and sleepy. He’s had his own Christmas festivities going on at the house, but it’s mostly just

him and his sisters sharing a bottle of bourbon.

(“You let your baby sister drink?” El asks, her words still a little slurred.

“Hey, she’s a college student, now. Besides, we’re not going anywhere and alcohol’s about the only thing that can melt through the icy tension in the house right now,” Mike says, just about as intoxicated as her.

“Alright, fair,” El concedes. “Besides, it’s not like I didn’t drink that age, either. Especially when I went overseas where the drinking age was lower than here....”

“Exactly, Miss Judgy,” Mike says, teasing, which just prompts El to stick her tongue out at him like the oh-so mature 28 year old woman she is.)

The conversation doesn’t last as long as some of the others they’ve had over the past several days, not with both of them a bit drunk, and both El and Mike almost each fall asleep a couple of times mid-sentence. They get off the call, promising to talk the next day, and El, once again, goes to bed happy and mostly content.

The only way things could be better would be if Mike was actually here with her instead of with his family. But El will take what she can get.

And then she wakes up on Christmas Day and a sense of melancholy has settled over her.

Because if Christmas Eve is her day with her step-family, Christmas Day is about her mother.

And there’s a whole other tradition surrounding that, one that’s just for her and Hop.

It’s a little after 9 in the morning when there’s a knock on El’s bedroom door. She’s been awake for maybe 5 minutes and hasn’t quite gotten the ambition to get out of bed yet - whether it’s lethargy from yesterday’s excesses or just forestalling the inevitable, El’s not quite sure. “It’s open!” El calls out, rolling over so she can sit up,

arms raised above her head in a lazy stretch.

It's her dad and El blinks to clear the last remnants of sleep from her eyes. "Hey, you able to be ready to go in about a half an hour?"

El gives Hop a small, humorless grin. "Give me 40 minutes and make sure there's a travel mug of coffee waiting for me and you betcha."

Hop breathes out a low, quiet laugh. "You got it, sweetheart."

Hop closes the door behind him, leaving El alone in her room once more. El lets out a rough sigh, cheeks puffing out from the force of the exhale. She rubs a hand across her face to try and induce some semblance of wakefulness - mornings are *not* her thing - before she slowly, oh so slowly, slides out of bed.

El gets ready with care: showering, drying and brushing her hair, doing her makeup, picking out the right dress.

A little over 30 minutes later, El stands in front of her closet mirror, fingers fiddling with the skirt of her dress as its hem swishes around just above her knees, and tries not to bite her lip out of nervousness.

The dress she's wearing is a bright, rich red color, very Christmas-themed. Hugging her tight through the torso before flaring out into a full skirt at her hips, with its long sleeves that cling tight to her arms and wide, boat neckline, it's a dress that is elegant and serene, appropriate for Christmas Day celebrations.

Appropriate for visiting her mother.

In deference to the weather, El's paired the dress with thick, black tights and knee-high black boots, and her hair's half pinned behind her head, the rest of it left to fall freely down her shoulders and back in thick waves. She looks coiffed, *beautiful* - this she knows.

Still doesn't help ease her nerves. If anything, it almost makes it worse.

What if she's dressing up like this for nothing?

Giving herself a shake, El turns away from the mirror and grabs a

pair of earrings - a simple pair of sparkling studs - and puts them on as she makes her way downstairs, determined to move steadfastly through her day.

Hop's in the kitchen, waiting for her, wearing a pair of slacks and a button down, thick wool coat thrown over one of the chairs, as he pours coffee and cream into a to-go mug. The rest of the first floor is empty, which means that everyone's still in bed, recovering after the festivities of last night.

El smiles as she gets to the first floor landing. "You don't get much opportunity to dress like that anymore, do you?" she asks. Back when they lived in Indianapolis, back when Hop had been a detective, he dressed like that every day for work. But, now, his wardrobe consists mostly of police uniforms on shift, and jeans and flannel off.

Hop gives her a grimacing smile. "Just glad this suit still fits. Besides, you know how your mother is."

El sighs as she approaches him and takes the proffered to-go mug. "Yeah, I know." Boy, does El know.

Terry Ives was - and still is, depending on the day - enthralled with the pageantry of life, with the drama and the spectacle. It wasn't that she was concerned how others saw her and her family - she just took so much joy in things being elegant and pretty, in the artistry of it all. It's one of the reasons she pushed El into dance in the first place when El was a little kid.

It's also the reason why she loved watching Hop go to work everyday in a suit and tie, or the elaborate costumes El wore for her dance recitals.

Terry Ives just liked things to be extraordinarily beautiful.

And El sometimes can't help but wonder if that wasn't a contributing factor into what happened to her mom.

El shakes her head to clear away the rabbit hole her thoughts are going down and, with a closed mug of coffee firmly in hand, she goes to grab her nice winter coat from the hall closet. "Are we ready?" she

asks as she puts her coat on one arm at a time, switching the mug between her hands.

“Yeah, let’s get going,” Hop says, shucking on his jacket as he pushes past her towards the front door.

El follows dutifully and hopes that the drive gives the nerves in her stomach a chance to fade away.

It’s not the longest drive from Hawkins to the outskirts of Indianapolis - maybe 45 minutes - but it’s long enough for El to get lost in the way the road disappears beneath the tires, trees zooming by outside the passenger window.

Terry Ives lives in an assisted living facility, where she has around-the-clock care to help her manage her good days and survive her bad ones.

El doesn’t like to think about how much this costs - and Hop wouldn’t tell her even if she asked, since she knows he helps with some of it, her Aunt Becky with some, and the State the rest - but she knows it can’t be cheap.

The complex always gives El the creeps a little and she sticks close to her dad as he checks in with security and asks how Terry’s doing.

Some days, Terry’s doing well. She can talk, she’s mostly lucid, and she’s present. El loves it when she calls and her mom’s having a good day. And it’s especially nice when Terry’s good days coincide with an in-person visit.

Today is not one of those days.

Today, Terry is practically catatonic, sitting in her favorite rocking chair as she stares blindly out the window. She’s wearing a clean bathrobe over a pretty nightgown, her feet swathed in thick socks, hair pulled back in a clean ponytail.

And El's heart just *sinks*.

Oh, Mom....

It's a pretty miserable visit, all said and done. El pulls a chair up next to her mom while Hop paces and frets, sitting in brief stints before starting the whole cycle over again.

They've been there for maybe an hour and half when Hop grumbles under his breath. "I'm gonna go talk to the nurses, see about a couple of things," is what he says before he slips out of the room, leaving El alone with her mom.

Once El can no longer see her dad's form, she focuses her attention on her mom, reaching out to take one of her mom's hands in both of hers.

It hurts, seeing her like this. Hurts more than there are words to describe.

El remembers Terry from when she was a kid - dynamic, full of life, always ready with a laugh and a smile, free with hugs and kisses for her only daughter. That Terry is still in there, somewhere, and still comes out on some days.

But this woman is a shell of her former self and the hole that realization leaves in El's heart has a gravitational well that keeps her from looking too closely. Because, some days, El's not sure if she'll be able to find her way out if she falls in deep enough.

El's not entirely sure how much Terry can hear her, can understand her, but she doesn't think she can sit in this silence anymore.

So, El starts talking.

"Hey, Mama," El says, her voice quiet and thick, filled with sad longing. "I've told you about Mike, right? I know I've mentioned him, at least. Well, you'll be happy to know that he and I are together now...."

El's still talking about Mike, still telling her mom about him, almost a half an hour later when Hop walks back into the room. He doesn't

say anything, but El can see him out of the corner of her eye, can see the fond look he's giving both her and her mom as she talks about the things she and Mike want to do when they're both back in Chicago, on the dates they want to go on and the places they want to go.

But, the entire time, Terry barely acknowledges them, at best. There might have been a moment where she squeezed El's hand, but it was fleeting and too faint for El to be sure.

And, so, a couple of hours after arriving, El and Hop decide that it's time to go. It's just too disheartening to stay.

They're halfway back to Hawkins, the winter sky clear and piercingly bright, when El becomes aware of the tears in her eyes and she's entirely not sure that they're from the brightness of the sun.

"You ok there, honey?" Hop asks, his voice gruff.

El swallows a lump in her throat and breathes in a shaky breath, feeling like she's on the edge of crying. "Not really," she says, hugging her arms tight around her torso. "It's just...it's really sad, Dad, what happened to her."

"I know," Hop says. "There are so many things I wish worked out differently, but what happened to your mom is at the very top of that list. I'm not saying she and I would still be married, but I never wanted her to be anything other than happy and healthy."

El's lower lip wobbles and she turns to look out the window as a few tears slip down her cheeks. It's all she's ever wanted for her mother, too. And it just breaks her heart that this is Terry's life, instead.

A few more tears escape from El's eyes, but she otherwise holds it together on the rest of the silent ride home. And by the time they get back to Hawkins, El is *exhausted*, just emotionally drained.

The house is quiet - Will and Greg are out spending time with Lucas and Dustin, and Joyce is picking up an overtime shift at Melvold's - so El spends the afternoon curled up with Jon in front of the TV (well, *he's* reading on the couch while *she* watches mindless Christmas fluff). Will and Greg join when they get back and if either

of them notice the melancholy mood that's surrounding El like a sad, little cloud, they don't say anything.

Still, Will lets El snuggle up against him as he joins her in watching TV and El's beyond grateful that she has him in her life, that she can call him her brother.

The day passes quietly like this, the Hoppers in a wistful, melancholy mood and the Byers' doing the best they can to bring calm joy and light-hearted laughter.

By the time El heads up to bed for the night, she's feeling better, but there's still a lingering sadness that clings to the edge of every thought. And it's with this mood still surrounding her that she hooks up her laptop and joins the video call Mike's set up for them again.

"Hey," she says, smiling at the sight of him, feeling a sense of peace fill her that's been missing all day. God, just the sight of him is doing wonders for her mood and she wishes he was here so badly right now. She wants nothing more than to be held by him, to feel his arms wrap around her strong and warm as they chase away the funk that's clouding her.

Mike smiles, all boyish grin and sparkling eyes. "Hi! Merry Christmas!"

Mike's chipper mood is infectious and El finds herself smiling wider. "Merry Christmas to you, too," she says, arranging the laptop screen so she can lie down while she talks to him. "Did you have a good Christmas?"

Mike shrugs, grin turning lopsided. "It was alright, I guess. Didn't get what I really wanted, though."

El's brow furrows and she frowns a bit. "What was it you wanted?" she asks, heart clenching with the sudden burst of sadness.

Mike's grin turns into a bashful smile. "You."

El feels her cheeks heat up in a fierce blush as her heart feels like it's close to bursting, skipping several beats. After the day she's had, it's too much, just *way* too much. The sheer happiness she feels at Mike's

simple, heart-stopping admission collides with the sadness that's been her almost constant companion all day and El can't stop the tears that spring to her eyes. She ducks her head to try and surreptitiously wipe away the tears, but her breath catches traitorously, the sound almost a sob.

"El? What's wrong?" Mike's voice is soft and concerned and so very gentle, it only makes her eyes fill with more tears.

"I wish you were here. I really just want you to hold me right now," El says, practically choking out the words.

"I wish I were there, too," Mike says and El looks back at the screen to see him looking at her with an expression that warms her with how rich it is, full of caring and affection. If he can't be there to hug her, then El figures being able to see him looking at her like this is the next best thing. "Do you wanna tell me what happened?"

El lets out a ragged sigh and hugs her arms close to her body, feeling tired and vulnerable. But it's ok because she knows Mike will protect her, will keep her heart safe and sound. "I went to visit my mom today," El says, her voice barely above a whisper.

Mike frowns. "I take it that it didn't go well."

El shakes her head and, before she can stop herself, she's telling Mike *everything*, about her mom's illness and the long road it's been, about how it collided with her parents' divorce and about how she's been trying to figure out how to cope with it her entire life. And, the entire time, she's barely holding back tears, overwhelmed with both her emotions and the way Mike's looking at her. Because Mike's looking at her with a combination of empathy and awe, like he's amazed by her even as he feels for her. It's too much and El feels herself falling even deeper in love with him.

"I guess it's just not fair, you know?" El says, voice hoarse from both all the talking and from the emotions coursing through her. "And, I know, life's not fair, but no one deserves to live like that. And I think there's a part of me that's scared *I'm* going to end up like that and—" El breaks off, words getting stuck in her throat as it tightens up. "I think I would rather be dead than trapped like that."

"You won't," Mike says adamantly, sounding so firm El almost can't help but believe him. "What happened to your mom...I can't imagine having to deal with that. But you're not going to end up like that. Your future is too bright for that to happen to you."

El scoffs, a little bit of bitterness seeping in. "And my mom's wasn't?" El pauses, sighing. "I know what you're trying to say, though. And thank you. It means everything coming from you."

Mike shrugs and looks away for a second, a bit bashful. "You're amazing, El. And it's not fair that any of this has happened to you, never mind your mom. And I wish there was something I could do to fix it for you, to make her better so you could be happier."

El smiles. "Just the fact that you want to is amazing." El shakes her head, feeling incredulous in the best way. "I can't believe how lucky I am that you're in my life. What did I do to deserve you?"

"I wonder the same thing about you every day," Mike all but whispers. "I'm not sure what I did right to have you in my life, but I'm forever thankful for it. For you."

El's heartbeat flutters and she feels like all her emotions are dangerously close to the surface, especially what she feels for him. El shifts so that she's laying with her head propped up by a hand and, for a second, she can't bring herself to look at him. "Mike, I—" Her breath catches in her throat as she bites back the rest of what she was going to say. But there's no hiding the raw emotion in her voice, the soft breathlessness and overwhelming fondness. Because it's obvious in every breath she takes, in every beat of her heart: she's in love with him - she's so in love with him, she can barely contain it.

El gathers the courage to look at Mike's face and she almost cries at the emotion she sees reflected back at her. Mike's looking at her like she's all he'll ever need, like she's *everything*. She's never felt more loved and cherished in her entire life than she does in this very moment. "Me, too," Mike says, his voice thick with the same emotion she seems to be feeling.

There's a long moment, a heavy silence in which neither of them seem to want to say the words that appear to be on the tips of their

tongues, either because they're scared or because they're not ready. Or, most likely, a little of both. Still, it's nice to know that she's not alone in this, that Mike is just as overwhelmed with all of this as she is.

So, El smiles, a deep sense of contentment settling over her heart, and lets out a soft sigh. "Merry Christmas, Mike," she says, the words soft but warm, filled with everything she's feeling in this moment.

Mike returns her smile and El can't help the way her heart squeezes painfully in her chest. God, she just loves him so, so much. "Merry Christmas to you, too, El."

There's another beat, a pause in the conversation, before Mike picks it back up on a completely separate topic, something light-hearted and nerdy and absolutely everything El needs in this very moment.

But, as they talk, El can't stop thinking about getting back home to Chicago, back home to *him*, where she can touch him and hold him and just be with him.

And she's never, *ever* going to let him go.

Notes for the Chapter:

Whee! They love each other! And they were so close to saying it! Thanks for reading, everyone, and I hope you enjoyed it!

Also, I make no promises about when the next chapter is up. It seems like my posting schedule is once every 4 weeks or so, given how crazy my life is and how long these chapters have become (why can't I do anything normal? Do you all even *want* that? Pls let me know...I almost feel guilty how long these damn things have become. Like, what is wrong with me?)

ANYWAY, if anyone of you wants to bug me and hasn't been able to, please come find me on Tumblr (I'm fatechica on there, as well)!

And, while I'm here, I want to announce Mileven Week on Tumblr! I'm part of a fabulous team of ladies who have organized a week long celebration of our favorite adorable nerds! From November 6th to November 12th, we invite everyone to post and share fanfic, fanart, fanvids, and edits (even essays!) about our favorite couple. The themes will be announced on October 15th on Tumblr (just search for Mileven Week on Tumblr and you'll find the site!) and we're still accepting theme submissions!. So, drop on by with some suggestions of your own and I hope to see what everyone's gonna make during that week!

8. Why Don't You and I (Because You're So Smooth)

Notes for the Chapter:

Ooh, I'm getting back to normal-ish! It's been just over three weeks since my last chapter and I'm here with another one! Huzzah!

Also, eheheheheh...um, I have some news for y'all. I've pushed the total number of chapters from 9 to 10. Because I have TOO MANY WORDS.

Like, literally. The last third of this chapter that I had planned I didn't even get to, this got so long. So...enjoy?

Warning: there's some, um...fairly heavy sensuality going on here. Nothing terribly explicit, but...very suggestive. As always, forewarned is forearmed, I like to say.

Also, I just realized that, with this chapter, I have written over 500,000 words for ST in the last...10 months? And the vast, *vast* majority of that is Mileven. Like, HOLY CRAP I HAVE A LOT OF WORDS.

Don't mind me, I'm just marveling about this over here....

half a million words omg

*Not even back in Chicago for 12 hours and it's already all going to shit.
Fuck. My. Life.*

This is the thought going El's head as she races to get ready on the Thursday morning after New Years. School may not be back in session until next Monday, but that doesn't mean the staff have the day off. No, this first day back at St. Ignatius is marked by an 8:15

staff meeting, one that it will be a miracle if El gets to on time, which is doubly disappointing for two reasons. One, El *hates* being late. And two?

She was supposed to see Mike before the meeting. They'd planned on getting together a half an hour before the meeting to reconnect...which El thinks is probably the most polite way of saying "making out" she's ever heard.

But none of that is going to happen now.

Because El overslept.

By *a lot*.

Like, almost an hour.

So, instead of being able to take her time to get ready, to make sure everything is *perfect* before she sees Mike again, she's racing around trying to just get out the door anywhere close to on time to make the meeting.

None of this would have happened if my flight hadn't been delayed 4 hours.

El hadn't gotten back home until 1 in the morning, when she'd been supposed to arrive with enough time to get a late dinner and go to bed early so she could wake up refreshed and ready to tackle the day...ready to see Mike again.

At first, El thinks that maybe, *maybe*, she'll be able to salvage something of her early morning plans. But, when she finishes getting dressed after showering - thank god she's spent days planning what to wear today so she's able to get dressed without the frustrating delay of figuring out what to wear - she realizes that there's no way she's getting out of the house on time for her original plans. Hell, it's going to be a close call getting to work on time and it'll be a miracle if she gets coffee, much less something to eat.

So, at 7:30, with a sinking heart, El grabs her phone and calls Mike.

Mike picks up after the second ring, his voice resonating in her ear as

he answers. “Hey, there,” he says, all soft and tender, an undercurrent of excitement rippling through the words. El can’t help the way she shivers at the sound of his voice, the way her skin breaks out in delicious tingles. The sound of his voice manages to somehow affect her like this every time and El hopes it never stops. “Everything ok?”

At the question, El pouts, shoulders slumping as she moves through her bedroom to grab her shoes. “No, everything *sucks.*”

“What happened?” Mike asks, all concerned, and El can see the look that’s on his face right now. God, she just wants to be with him *right now* and it’s so unfair.

“I overslept,” El says as she sits on her bed and slips on her shoes, knee-high boots that slide easily over the tight jeans she’s wearing. “I didn’t get home until 1 in the morning and I accidentally turned off my alarm instead of hitting the snooze button, so now I’m running *really* late and I haven’t even had coffee yet, much less left the house, and I’m *so late and-*”

“El, *breathe,*” Mike says, cutting her off.

El stutters, gasping in a deep breath, before continuing. “I don’t think I’m going to make it for our meet up this morning,” she says softly, sadly. “Hell, I might even be late for the staff meeting.” El stops, pausing in zipping up her boots. “I’m sorry.” She all but whispers the apology, feeling so frustrated and annoyed at herself, it’s threatening to sour the rest of her day.

“Hey, no, it’s ok,” Mike says. “Yeah, I was really looking forward to seeing you in a bit, but shit happens. You just focus on getting to work, ok? There’ll be time later, I promise.”

El feels the beginnings of a smile creep up onto her lips, despite the disappointment that’s still resonating inside of her. Mike *always* seems to know just what to say to make her feel better. “I’m going to hold you to that promise,” she says, sighing happily. “Save me a seat at the meeting?”

Mike lets out a chortling laugh. “You mean you want me to save you

a seat where we'll have to sit next to each other for two hours and I can't kiss you? You're a meaner woman than I thought, torturing me like that. You're a *sadist*. ”

El lets out a delicate snort as she digs through her makeup to grab the things that she needs. “Right, like I'm not going to be torturing myself at the same time.”

“Oh, so you're a masochist, too?”

“Michael Wheeler, you stop right there, or I *swear....*” El says, voice stern, huffing out a sigh through her nostrils.

“And now you're bossing me around?” Mike asks, sounding way too amused. “Wait, you aren't also into bondage by any chance, are you? Because, if you are, I think we might need to have a talk about these BDSM tendencies I'm noticing....”

El rolls her eyes, even as she's smiling. “I'm hanging up now.”

“No, wait, you didn't answer my questions and I-”

“Ok, bye now!” El interrupts, laughing as she pulls the phone away from her ear and hangs up.

El slips her phone into the pocket of her jeans and looks at the reflection staring back at her in the mirror as she hurries to do her makeup, smiling all the while. *What is she going to do with him?*

Shaking her head to clear the path her thoughts are traveling at *that* question, and temporarily ignoring the incoming text messages that make her phone vibrate in her pocket, El focuses on doing her makeup. Her motions are sure and quick, borne of a lifetime of quick makeup applications and, a couple of minutes later, El leans back away from the mirror to do one last inspection, to make sure everything's perfect.

Her hair spills freely down her back and shoulders in gentle waves, the ends curling halfway down her back. Her upper body is encased in a soft, black sweater, the neckline dipping a little lower than is strictly professional, the fabric clinging tightly to the lines of her torso. She's paired the sweater with her nicest pair of jeans, the ones

that make her ass and legs look fantastic, and her black, knee-high boots which give her a few extra inches of height. Her makeup is light and natural, simply enhancing her features instead of masking them. A bit of mascara, a light dusting of blush, and a layer of lip gloss make her look fresh-faced, yet sexy - which is exactly what she's going for.

Smiling at her reflection, El turns on her heel and rushes to grab her things so she can run out the front door, glancing at the text messages Mike sent her while she juggles her things: *You're mean, hanging up on me like that. - Wait, are you punishing me? - Oh my god, you're totally into BDSM, aren't you? - Wait, hold on, don't tell me. I wanna discover this for myself. - Ok, ok, just let me know if you have a closet full of black vinyl and riding crops and then I'll discover the rest for myself.*

Giggling, El stops just inside of her front door to text back. *You know, this only makes me wonder if you WANT to be punished. Do we have to have a talk about this while we also talk about my BDSM tendencies?*

Ha, I knew it! - Oh, wait, shit, uh...I mean, sorry, mistress, is what Mike texts back as El starts up her car, her laughter filling the car as she reads the text while waiting for the engine to warm up.

Even though this morning is *not* going at all how she wanted it to, El can't stop smiling. Because Mike is...just *amazing* - funny and sweet and silly, never failing to cheer her up when she's feeling down.

But she's also smiling because she's finally, *actually* going to see him again after three weeks, three weeks of phone calls and video chats and longing so sweetly poignant, it's made her heart hurt unceasingly.

And now she's only 20 minutes away from seeing him again, from looking at him for *real* and not through the video feed on her computer screen, where she can actually reach out and touch him and kiss him and, *oh god*, she can't wait.

So, with hands that are shaking mostly from excitement (and a little from cold), El pulls away from the curb and begins the drive to work...

And to Mike.

Mike can't lie - he's definitely disappointed that he's not going to get to see El before the staff meeting this morning, *especially* since it's been days since he's seen her and he's really not sure how he's going to sit next to her for two hours and keep himself from touching her or, worse, *kissing* her in front of everyone.

Still, he'll endure it if it means that he can be in the same room as her once more, if he can see her and hear her inches away from him instead of miles away. Because these last few weeks have been absolute torture.

Don't get him wrong; the phone calls and video chats have been amazing - and not just because of the phone sex *or* that he's seen her without a shirt on. Talking with her every day, telling her things he swears he's never told anyone, getting to hear her voice and have her share things with him in return, is a gift he never, ever wants to give up. He wouldn't trade the last three weeks for anything...he just might have added some kissing instead.

Kissing, at the very least.

But Mike's ready to see El again. He's so ready, he feels like he's about to vibrate out of his skin.

The days after Christmas were filled with hours of boredom, his nightly calls with El the shining highlight of his day. He came back to Chicago on the 27th and has essentially just been puttering around on his own for over a week. The rest of the Party really only came back into Chicago after New Years, all the rest of them occupied with their own vacation plans, so Mike's been practically by himself until a couple of days ago, when they all got together for game night at his house.

So, Mike occupied his time by alternating between doing work around the house and writing, waiting for any contact from El. But,

with her in New York, their conversations were a lot shorter than when she was at her parents' house. She was spending time with friends, going out frequently, and his nightly calls with her went from around three hours to about one. Which, when factoring in just how needy Mike seems to be when it comes to El, was all but unbearable.

But, she's back now. Back in Chicago and he's going to see her in a relative handful of minutes.

If only she hadn't overslept, Mike thinks after he finishes barraging El with teasing text messages. He'd just parked his car on campus when she called, heading inside shortly after. He just finished putting his things in his office, but, given what El just told him, he finds himself slipping on his jacket and grabbing his keys so he can run a very quick errand.

God, he hopes he remembers exactly what to get.

Maybe 20 minutes later and Mike's back on campus, juggling a coffee cup from a cafe a few streets over and a pastry bag as he gets out of his car and locks it. There are way more cars parked now than there were when Mike left on his quick morning detour and Mike risks a glance at his watch to find that it's just after 8. *Meeting's in less than 15 minutes.*

He heads back inside, trading a handful of hellos and how-are-yous and how-was-your-breaks as he moves through the halls on his way to the staff meeting room. Mike doesn't bother going back to his office to put his coat away. No, he wants to get to the meeting room so he can save El a seat next to him. Even though he's 100% sure sitting next to her is going to be a very particular brand of torture since he's not going to be able to kiss her or touch her like he so desperately wants to, he knows it will be way worse if she sits anywhere *but* next to him.

There's only a couple of people in the meeting room when Mike gets in and he smiles in greeting as he grabs a pair of seats across from the door so he can make sure he sees El when she gets in. He places the coffee and pastry bag on the table in front of the chair he ends up hanging his jacket on and then sits down in the chair next to it. *There, now it definitely looks like someone's sitting here.*

“You saving that seat for someone?”

Mike looks over, startled a bit at the voice, to see Nelson Price, the German teacher, giving him a curious smile. More people have walked in now, the room about half full, and a lot of them are looking over at him with the same curiosity. “Uh, yeah, um...you know El, right? Well, she overslept, so she asked me to save her a seat.”

“And the coffee?” Nelson asks, smile turning less curious and more amused.

Mike shrugs and fights the blush he knows is creeping up his cheeks. “She didn’t have time to have any, so....”

“Oh, quit teasing him, Nelson,” Liz Hiroto says as she maneuvers into a seat across from where Mike’s sitting. “I think it’s very nice what he’s done for El.”

Nelson holds his hands up in surrender before he looks over at Mike. “Sorry, man,” he says, contrite.

“It’s ok,” Mike says before he turns his attention on Liz. “Thanks for sticking up for me.”

Liz smiles and waves a hand dismissively. “Eh, don’t worry about it.” She perks up a second later and points at him, finger jabbing in his direction. “Hey, don’t let me forget. I need to talk to you after the meeting’s over.”

Mike raises an eyebrow. “About what?”

“Coordinating concepts for some of the applied lessons I have this semester. I’ll tell you all about it after the meeting. Not enough time now.”

“Sure, sounds good,” Mike says, intrigued by the prospect. He loves getting to partner with his colleagues to teach the students something, so he’s incredibly curious.

But all of that curiosity flies out the window moments later.

Because three minutes before the start of the meeting, El walks into the room.

And nothing, absolutely *nothing*, else matters. Because she's here. El's *finally* here.

And she's so fucking beautiful, Mike swears his heart almost stops.

It feels like time slows to the point where everything just freezes as Mike stares at El, breath catching in his throat while every nerve lights up, skin tingling, making him feel light headed and dizzy.

Mike drinks in the sight of her, like a man dying of thirst finding an oasis. He can feel a bunch of eyes on him, curious and amused - *damn nosy gossips* - and Mike really wishes he could have this moment *not* under the watchful eyes of his colleagues. But, when all is said and done, Mike really doesn't care because El's here, looking gorgeous and *real*.

He can't stop staring at her - doesn't want to, in fact. El's left her hair down, honey brown strands falling down her shoulders and back in lush waves, his fingers *itching* with the need to run through them. His greedy gaze takes in the tight black sweater and the equally tight jeans she's wearing, his breath hitching at the way the fabric clings to her every curve, the way the neckline of her sweater dips dangerously low to expose the sweep of her collarbones and the barest hint of the skin between her breasts. Mike almost wants to run his hand over his mouth to make sure he's not drooling as he fantasizes about seeing if that sweater is as soft as it looks, how it will feel when he lets his hands disappear up under the hem of it.

But, really, Mike's focused on El's face - full lips, flushed cheeks, eyes sparkling, looking fresh-faced and oh so tempting. And when she sees him from across the room, her eyes light up, a coy smile pulls up at the corner of her lips, and Mike's heart begins pounding in his chest. For a brief moment, they are the only two people in the world as everything else just fades away, and Mike can't stop the way he smiles back, feeling almost shy with how overwhelmed he is right now.

He glances down for a brief second - just to get a measure of control,

really - and when he looks up, he notices that El's started making her way towards him. Mike watches her, catching glimpses of her behind their colleagues as she moves around the table.

Like he's floating through a dream, Mike blinks and, suddenly, El's next to him, sliding into the seat beside him, so close that it would be no effort at all to reach out and touch her. Hell, he can almost *feel* her, her shoulder maybe a couple of inches away from his, and his senses are immediately assaulted by *her*: the smell of her shampoo, the way she looks as she smiles up at him, the heat of her so close to him.

And then she speaks and Mike hears El's voice in person for the first time in almost three weeks. "Hi, I made it," she says, voice light and lilting, maybe a little breathless.

Mike glances around the room out of the corner of his eye, just to check, and notices that everyone is very pointedly *not* staring at them. He almost shakes his head in incredulity, but he's too wrapped up in El to spare the effort. "You made it," he says, smiling back at her, leaning forward with his forearms folded on the table, torso turned slightly so he can look at her without craning his neck. "You look amazing today, by the way," he says, voice dipping low so as not to be overheard.

A pleased blush spreads high across El's cheeks and she smiles even wider, ducking her head. The move causes some of her hair to fall in her face and Mike watches, entranced, as her hand, petite with long, delicate fingers, comes up to gently tuck the strands behind her ear. "Charmer," she says, sounding almost overwhelmed. As Mike watches, El notices the cup of coffee and pastry bag in front of her, startling a bit as she shifts to look at it. She glances back up at Mike a split second later, looking so adorably confused, it takes all of Mike's willpower not to lean over and kiss her. "What's this?"

Feeling a little bashful, but proud at the same time, Mike breathes out a soft laugh. "Well, you said you didn't have time to have coffee since you overslept. I figured that also meant you didn't have time to eat, so...I went out and grabbed you something. Triple shot latte and a plain croissant, your usual."

El sucks in a surprised gasp and Mike watches with a little concern as her eyes shimmer with a thin layer of tears. “You got me breakfast?” she asks, a small smile taking over her lips once more.

Mike feels himself relax at the happy expression that takes over El’s face. “Didn’t want you to go hungry,” he says. “Figured your morning was already bad enough.”

For a moment, El doesn’t say anything. She just stares up at him, lips parting in shock or disbelief. Mike’s not sure which, but he can’t help the way his gaze falls to her mouth and, *holy shit*, he really, *really* wants to kiss her. God, he can practically taste it, her mouth on his, and his memory taunts him with the last time he experienced it - *her lips soft against his, mouth open and inviting, tongue dancing seductively with his, the soft exhale of her breath out through her nose, fanning against his cheek, the slide of her hair through his fingers, the scrape of her scalp beneath his fingertips which makes her let out a breathy moan and kiss him just that much harder.*

El closes her eyes to take in a deep breath, like she’s trying to calm herself, and when she looks back at him, the look in her eyes forces Mike to bite back the groan that builds in his chest. Because she’s looking at him like she wants to *devour* him. And Mike’s tempted to let her. “God, you have no idea how badly I want to kiss you right now,” El says with a ragged whisper.

“Think I might, actually,” Mike says, just as softly. He grins, jubilant and teasing. “And to think, we could have been doing just that if *someone* didn’t oversleep.”

El glares at him, but it lacks true malice, especially because her glare is undermined by the smile she’s barely containing. “Quiet, you,” El says as Mr. Russell calls the staff meeting to order.

“Make me,” Mike says under his breath.

He looks over at El in time to see her giving him a look that sends shivers down his spine, one that fills him with eager excitement. “Later,” El mouths, lips curling up in a flirtatious smile before she winks at him.

Mike tries to pay attention to the meeting, but his thoughts are all tangled up in the woman sitting next to him as Mr. Russell goes on about the end of the semester and various events the teachers at St. Ignatius need to keep in mind.

He watches as El eats the breakfast he brought her, swelling with pride as she gives him a grateful smile. He's fast discovering that he would do *anything* for her, especially if she keeps smiling at him like that, so bright it threatens to outshine the sun.

And then, about halfway through the meeting, Mike feels the slight, but unmistakable pressure of a hand on his knee. He jumps slightly in surprise, causing a couple of pairs of eyes to swing his way, but Mike manages to keep a straight face.

Which is an especially monumental feat as that hand, small and slim and oh so sneaky, slides up so that Mike can feel the drag of a fingertip up and down the inseam of his jeans, sweeping back and forth between his knee and the middle of his thigh.

Mike's heart pounds heavy in his chest, blood racing in his veins as his whole world boils down to the feeling of El's hand on his thigh. He swallows roughly and tries to keep his breathing steady, but it's so hard and his heart is racing trying to keep himself in check. It feels like every inch of him is on fire, alive in a way he hasn't been since the last time he was with El. And he wants so badly to pull her to him, to kiss her and never stop. But he *can't*, not in a room full of their coworkers, not when they're not *alone*.

So, with that option out of the picture, Mike settles for the next best thing: returning the favor.

Slowly, so as not to give away what he's doing, Mike slides his hand off the table and, after a brief pause, reaches out for El. Given how close she is, it takes pretty much no effort until he feels the heat of El's thigh beneath his palm. His heart leaps into his throat. *Holy shit*, he's actually *touching* her. She's here and real and not a figment of his imagination (not that it was a possibility, but still...Mike likes covering all his bases).

El makes no reaction to Mike's touch except for an almost inaudible

gasp that only spurs him on further. *He can so do better than that.*

Mike presses his hand harder against El's jean-covered thigh, fingers curling around the curves beneath his touch. He gives her thigh a firm squeeze, eliciting another almost silent, shaky gasp from El, before he slowly slides his hand up towards her hip. The glide of her leg beneath his palm is the best kind of thrilling, the kind that makes him wonder what this must feel like *without* clothes on, and his heartbeat somehow manages to kick it up a notch. But he doesn't stop - he *can't*.

There's a moment where Mike isn't sure where his hand is going to stop - *once he reaches her hip, then what?* - but before he can wonder too deeply, El removes her hand from his leg and places it on the hand sliding up her thigh, her palm warm against the back of his hand.

Mike's torn between relief and disappointment - really, she can touch him wherever she wants, *whenever* she wants - but he also recognizes they're in public, that this really isn't the best place for this. So, when El curls her fingers around his palm, Mike takes it as his cue to turn his hand so he can hold hers, the back of his hand pressing against the top of her thigh while his fingers intertwine with hers.

They spend the rest of the meeting like this, holding hands under the table while trying to pay attention to what's going on around them. Holding El's hand is both calming and exciting at the same time and Mike never wants to let go. It feels like everything's back the way it should be, with her sitting next to him with their hands intertwined. Everything is *right* with the world again and Mike's never been happier.

Eventually, *thankfully*, the meeting ends and all of Mike's fellow teachers get up from their seats to head off to their respective offices and prepare for the last few weeks of the semester. Mike looks over at El to find her looking back at him, a suggestive smile curving her lips, eager amusement painted across every inch of her face. Mike finds himself smiling back and he has every intention of taking El up on the promise embedded in the look she's giving him, the promise of carrying out their original early morning plans. Mike's heart picks up the pace again as an army of butterflies beat their wings furiously

beneath his skin, every nerve exploding with excitement.

El lets go of his hand and, without a word, stands up, Mike following suit, hot on her heels like an obedient puppy. But, before he can actually follow her, a voice shouts out, reality cutting in. "Hey, Romeo," Liz Hiroto calls out. "Stay where you are. Gotta talk to you, remember?"

Mike freezes in place and looks back across the table at Liz, who's staring at him with a wry smile and eyes twinkling with naked amusement. "Oh, uh, right, that's right," he says after breathing in a steadyng gulp of air. He looks back over at El, who's halfway around the table by now, giving him a look that is partly amused, but mostly heavy with suggestion: eyes dark, cheeks flushed with excitement, lips parted just so. Her gaze lingers on him for a long moment, like she's trying to convey *everything* just with her eyes - *I'll be waiting, don't take long, I want you* - and Mike has to swallow roughly at the seductive promise in her gaze.

And then El turns to walk away and Mike's momentarily dumbfounded by watching her walk - the bounce of her hair and the sway of her hips making his heart pound furiously in his chest while every inch of him *craves* to slide his hands over those hips, to pull her towards him and reacquaint himself with how well they move against him. But she disappears from sight a couple of seconds later and Mike feels himself sag a bit, like a tether's been snapped at El's exit from the room.

He looks over at Liz, who's *still* looking at him all amused, now almost incredulously so, and he sighs, crossing his arms over his chest. "Ok, Liz, make this fast."

He's got someone to see and he *really* doesn't want to keep her waiting.

El enters her office feeling like she's going to explode.

For two hours - two whole *tortuous* hours - she had to sit next to the man she's desperately and achingly attracted to. All she could do was barely touch Mike's leg under the table and hold his hand when she what she *really* wanted to do was kiss him, to press herself up against him and feel his heat surround her, to be so close to him that it would be impossible to tell where she ends and he begins. Instead, she got the tiniest taste and it's left her feeling so frustrated, it almost hurts.

It's not enough. It'll never *be* enough. Her lips ache for his kisses, her body starved for his touch, and she needs *more*.

But, at the same time, what little she got is almost too much and El has to place a hand on her chest to try and calm her racing heart. From the way Mike looked at her when she walked into the meeting room, to the feel of his touch on her thigh, to the warmth of his hand in hers - all of it sets her heart racing, her blood warming with desire, and she feels so overwhelmed. She wants in a way that almost scares her - wholly and completely without any regard for logic - and El knows she's well past the point of reason or no return, that she's fallen so completely that she'll never find her way out.

All of which is totally fine because Mike is just *amazing*, lovely and sweet and considerate and just so goddamn attractive.

He brought you breakfast, her brain whispers, almost in awe, and El's heart clenches painfully at the memory. He brought her coffee and a pastry, remembering what she liked, and he did it just because he was worried about her, because he wanted to do something nice for her. El hadn't been lying when she told him how badly she wanted to kiss him. If anything, the words were insufficient to get across the depth of the desire she felt. Because nothing is more attractive than a man doing something nice for a woman *just because*. If they hadn't been in a room full of their coworkers, El would have pulled Mike in for a kiss that would have left both of them breathless.

I'll make sure to show him just how much I appreciate his kindness when he gets here, El thinks as she composes herself enough to move out of the entryway to her office and over to her desk. El figures since she's going to have to wait for Mike to show up - Liz has a tendency to go off on a tear when given the opportunity - she should probably try to

get some work done.

So, for the next 10 minutes or so, El checks her email and makes notes to herself about the things she wants to go over before school starts back up again, focusing heavily on the transfer students that are coming in over the following weeks.

But, the entire time, she has one eye on the doorway, not wanting to miss the moment Mike steps through it.

And when Mike finally steps into her office, all but rushing in like he's trying to escape being noticed by anybody else, El freezes for just a moment, heart leaping into her throat, as she stares at him.

He looks good enough to eat, El thinks and, while she knows part of that thought comes from the fact that it's been *three weeks* since she's spent any time with him, she also knows that it's because of one, very simple truth: Mike Wheeler is *incredibly* attractive.

He's dressed pretty casually in jeans and a dark green sweater, sleeves rolled up just enough to show off his forearms, and his hair is its usually, rakishly messy cloud of black locks. With his high cheekbones, powerful jaw, and gorgeous sprinkling of freckles, the entire look is just *devastating*. And El knows that Mike has no fucking clue about any of this.

Well, that's just not right.

Still seated, time resumes its usual march as El watches Mike smile over at her, reaching behind him to close the door to her office. "Liz talk your ear off?" El asks with an amused, happy grin, her words accompanied by the sound of the door locking as Mike turns the lock.

"Unfortunately," Mike says and he takes a couple of steps into the office, stopping a few feet in front of the door.

El stands, heart racing and beating loudly in her chest, and she has to fight to keep her breathing in check enough for her to speak. "Well, looks like you managed to escape unscathed."

Mike shrugs, the motion lazy and fluid. "I'm just good like that, I guess," he says, eyes never leaving her while she slowly steps around

her desk.

“Wonder what else you’re good at,” El says. She leans back against her desk and loosely crosses her arms over her chest, very aware of how she’s delaying the inevitable, but loving the teasing game she’s playing, the way the tension is building up between them.

El watches as Mike gives her a once over, his gaze raking up and down her body, eyes filling with want. She sucks in a slow, deep breath as desire begins to warm her from within, pooling low in her belly. “Hmm, guess you’ll have to find out,” he says as he takes a step towards her, going along with the game El’s playing.

It’s hard to contain herself when he’s smiling at her like that, breathless and teasing, looking so happy even as he looks like he wants to kiss her and never, *ever* stop. But El manages, slowly pushing herself away from her desk and taking a couple of small steps towards him. The more the distance between them shrinks, the more El feels like she can’t breathe, like she’s just going to explode into pure sensation, and she shivers when she thinks about what it’ll feel like when he kisses her. “Can’t wait,” El says, stopping so there’s just a couple of feet between them.

“You’re mean, you know,” Mike says, cutting the distance separating them in half. He’s smirking down at her, hands tucked into his pockets, elbows loose at his side.

El lets out a dramatic gasp. “How so?” she asks, biting her lip to keep from smiling wide enough to hurt.

Mike’s gaze flicks down to her mouth and El lets her lower lip slide from out between her teeth, her tongue flashing out to wet her lips. El doesn’t miss *at all* the way Mike’s eyes darken or the way he sucks in a deep breath. “Have you already forgotten that little thing with your hand on my thigh under the table? You were playing with fire, Ms. Hopper.” His voice is low, *husky*, and El bites back a moan at the sound. *God*, how his voice affects her....

Every inch of El’s skin is tingling as she takes one more step forward so that she’s standing right in front of him. Smiling coyly, El glances down, feeling oh so flirtatious, before she looks back up at him,

lifting a hand so she can press her palm against Mike's chest, his heart beating hard beneath her touch. Hers starts beating in time with his and it skips a bit at the feel of the firm muscle beneath her touch. "What are you going to do about it?" El asks, words spoken no higher than a whisper, eyebrow arched in teasing challenge.

There's a long moment where Mike just looks down at her, cheeks flushing, color blossoming on the skin stretched over his cheekbones. His lips part just so and his gaze dances over her face, like he's not sure what he wants to look at, like he wants to look at everything all at the same time.

El stares back, hypnotized by the way he's looking at her, her heart beating in sync with the butterflies that dance beneath her skin. She's *waiting*, waiting to see what he's going to do, relishing in the way the tension builds unbearably between them, her breath coming in barely controlled pants, chest heaving with every desperate gulp of air.

And then Mike *moves*, rushing forward as he leans in, hands coming up to cup her face, palms warm against her cheeks with fingers gently pressing against the skin of her neck, so he can pull her towards him. El surges up, meeting him halfway just in time for his lips crash onto hers, mouths melding together in a kiss that just sets her on fire. Pleasure explodes along every fiber of her being, her soul *singing* with his closeness, with the feel of his mouth on hers and his hands on her skin. It feels so good, she almost wants to cry. She comes close, letting out a sobbing whimper as she brings her hands up to clasp around his neck, holding him close, her fingers playing in the hair at the nape of his neck.

Finally. Oh yes, finally.

Mike answers her with a low, rumbling groan that she feels more than hears, the vibrations reverberating around inside her chest. One hand slides up into her hair while the other sweeps over her shoulder, trailing down her spine to settle on the small of her back, the tips of his fingers playing at the hem of her sweater.

Now who's playing with fire? the only coherent portion left of El's brain whispers. But it's the best kind of fire to play with, the kind that leaves her craving *more*, that leaves her wanting everything.

El pushes up onto her toes, arching her body into the curve of Mike's torso as he leans over her. Her chest brushes against his with every heaving breath she sucks in through her nose, because she's not pulling her mouth from his for *anything*.

More, is what her body whispers, what her body *craves*, so she goes to oblige. Her lips part beneath the onslaught of Mike's kisses - his mouth hot against hers, full of seductive promise, making her feel light-headed as she drowns in the sensations he's setting off inside of her - and she flicks out her tongue to brush along the length of his lips, seeking entry.

The moan that escapes from Mike's throat as he opens his mouth against hers makes El's stomach swoop dangerously, tingles running up and down her spine. But then his tongue meets hers, allowing her to taste him for the first time in *weeks*, and El feels like she's going to melt. There are no words to describe the taste of him against her tongue, and no way to convey just how *amazing* it makes her feel. All she knows is that this is what she needs, him kissing her like he'll die if he stops, and absolutely nothing else matters.

Time ceases to lose all meaning as their mouths meet over and over, their kisses all consuming and dizzying. Their hands clutch at each other, almost bruising in their desperation. The only sounds that fill the room are that of their lips moving against each other and their heavy breathing, punctuated regularly with soft sighs and low, shivering moans.

The heat of Mike's palm against the small of her back bleeds through the fabric of her sweater and it makes El want to feel his touch on her bare skin. The hand in her hair is wonderful - his fingers combing through her hair, fingertips scraping against her scalp, occasionally fisting her hair in his hand - but it's not enough. Not after going without for *so long*.

El pushes at Mike, lowering herself enough so she can steer him towards the small couch she keeps in her office. She mostly uses it to have more intense counseling sessions with her students and occasionally to curl up on to take a nap. But now she's found a different use for it, a very much *not* school-approved use, one that makes her heart race and her breathing hitch as she shoves Mike so

that he sits heavily down onto it.

El spares a glance at Mike, drinking in the sight of his flushed cheeks and swollen lips, the way he looks up at her like she's everything he's ever wanted. And then she's crawling onto his lap, her knees on either side of his hips, as her fingers dive into his hair to pull his mouth back towards her, both of them moaning at the feel of being pressed up against each other.

Oh god, *this* is what she needs - the feel of him beneath her, his hands touching her *everywhere*, his mouth hard against hers, the heat of his body driving her wild as she presses herself against him. Mike's hands are relentless, tracing the lines of her torso, the curve of her hips, the length of her thighs, his touch sure yet teasing. He touches her like he wants to memorize the shape of her with his palms and it feels so, so good, even though she *still* needs more.

(*it will never be enough. nothing will ever be enough. she's going to want him like this until the day she dies, forever chasing getting her fill of him. and no matter how close she gets, she's always going to want more.*)

El drags her mouth from his, lips trailing down across his chin and up his jaw as she makes her way towards his ear. She gives his skin small nips, not enough to mark, but enough to make him hiss as she scrapes the lines of his jaw and neck with her teeth. Mike moves against her, hips pushing up against hers as his hands hold her tight, fingers digging into the flesh just above her thighs.

And then El takes his earlobe lightly between her teeth, wrapping her lips around it and sucking lightly. She hears the sound Mike makes right against her ear, a gasping whimper that is just shy of a sob, and it makes El feel powerful. "Fuck, El," Mike breathes, sounding so overwhelmed.

El removes her lips from his ear, but she doesn't move far, tilting her head just enough so she can whisper into his ear. "I need you to touch me," she says, almost surprised at how confident she sounds, even though she feels so, so needy. She traces her tongue along the shell of his ear, feeling him shiver beneath her, and tugs lightly on the cartilage with her teeth. "I want to feel your hands on my skin."

El pulls away enough to look Mike in the eye and she almost swoons at the way he's looking at her. Mike's jaw clenches, muscle working beneath the skin, and he looks at her like he's barely holding on to any shred of control. He gulps heavily, sucking in deep breaths of air. "You *are* aware we're at work, right?" he asks, but the question is a weak one, like Mike thinks it's his duty to at least point it out.

"Don't care," El says as she takes one of his hands from her hip and guides it up under the hem of her sweater. She gasps when she feels the tips of his fingers come into contact with the skin just above the waist of her jeans. "*Really* don't care."

She loses control of the situation, then, as Mike moves his hand the rest of the way, his other joining it, so that his palms are pressed against the bare skin of her waist, his fingers splayed across the small of her back, thumbs brushing against her stomach, and she *sweats* his hands are big enough to encircle her entirely. El arches into his touch, head tipping back as her neck goes boneless, pleasure overriding every nerve. "God, yes," she whispers, voice trailing off into a high-pitched whimper.

El hears Mike moving and she jumps a little when she feels his lips on her neck, high on her throat. She gasps, tipping her head back even further to give him better access. She reaches for him, clutching his shoulders to keep herself steady, as he moves across the skin of her neck, lips leaving a trail of hot, suckling kisses down the length of her throat. His mouth lingers on the skin just above her pulse point, where she *knows* he has to be able to feel the rapid beat of her heart, before moving lower still.

El squirms, skin feeling two sizes too small, at the dual assault of Mike's mouth moving across her collarbones and his hands moving up higher under her sweater as they map the shape of her curves, his touch ghosting over her skin. She gasps when she feels the heat of his palms through the thin lace of her bra, his fingers teasing her through the fabric, and it's like her whole body lights up as pleasure zips across every nerve. El presses herself even harder against him in a bid to get as close as possible, wishing she was actually feeling his touch on her bare skin. She remembers that night in his car, the way his fingers snuck beneath the underwire to touch her skin to skin, and she wants *so badly* to feel that again.

Mike trails his lips along the skin just above the neckline of her sweater and she cries out, feeling like every inch of her is on fire. God, she wants to feel his mouth *everywhere*, wants to know what it's like to have him explore every inch of her skin. It occurs to her, in the last thinking portion of her brain, that they're *both* playing with fire right now, teasing each other, pushing each other towards the point of no return, and she's not sure if *either* of them are going to back down. Because she knows that neither of them *want* to.

Like Mike can read her mind - *and maybe he can* - he stills, pulling his lips away from her skin just enough so he can talk, his forehead coming down to rest against her collarbone. "God, I can't believe I'm saying this, but we should probably slow down," he says, voice just barely higher than a whisper, ragged and tight, on the edge of losing control.

El sucks in a desperate gasp, letting out a sound that is pretty much just a petulant whine. "Don't want you to," she says, shifting a little, trying to chase the pleasure that races along inside her veins.

Mike grips her tight, fingers digging into the curve of her ribcage, stilling her in his lap. "I don't either," Mike says. He exhales deeply and presses a soft, sweet kiss to the middle of her sternum that has her sighing, before he sits back up, his hands sliding down to her waist.

El shivers at the drag of his palms along her bare skin as she sits up, but she's frowning despite everything. Because she *really* doesn't want to stop. And she knows he doesn't, either. "Well, this sucks," she says, one hand sliding down from his shoulders to sit over his heart, her fingers playing with the fabric of his sweater as she revels in the strong, fast beat of his heart beneath her touch.

Mike huffs out a sigh. "It does. But you *know* what would happen if we didn't stop." He pauses, grinning. "And I don't know about you, but I never exactly pictured *here* as the place where we have sex for the first time."

El giggles, unable to keep from doing so, and brings her other hand up to cup his cheek, running her thumb over his lower lip, swollen and glistening from their kisses. "You've never pictured us having sex

in here?”

Eyes flashing with heat, Mike lightly bites the flesh of the pad of her thumb before pressing a light kiss to the same spot. “No, not what I said. You have a couch in here. And a really large desk. *Of course* I’ve imagined us having sex in here. Just...not for the first time.”

“So, you trying to get me into your bed, then?” El asks with a wink, lips stretched in a teasing grin.

Mike chuckles, gaze dancing across her face. “That depends, is it working?”

“Hmm,” El says, pretending to think, drawing mindless patterns across the planes of Mike’s chest with her index finger. “Well, you’re seriously making me reconsider my ‘no-sex-on-the-first-date’ rule.”

Mike groans, throwing his head back against the cushions. “Oh god, there are more rules?”

El takes advantage of the way Mike’s sitting to nestle up against him, shifting her body to lay her head so that it’s pressed up against his shoulder and the underside of his jaw. She wraps her arms around his chest while she still sits with her knees on either side of his thighs. Mike’s arms come around to hold her, his hands leaving her skin as he hugs her tight, and when he leans his cheek against the top of her hair, El can’t help but sigh. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, you’ve made me break just about all of my rules so far. You’re a dangerous influence, you know.”

“Could say the same thing about you,” Mike says, warm and content. There’s a long pause before he speaks again. “This is nice,” he all but whispers.

“It is,” El says, arms tightening around him. “Too bad we can’t stay like this all day.”

“We can for a little while,” Mike says, shifting his head so he can press a soft kiss to the top of her head. El’s heart does a funny pitter-patter skip in her chest at the tender gesture. “I don’t think anyone will mind. They’d understand.”

El nods against his shoulder. “It *has* been weeks since we’ve seen each other. Surely, leniency is allowed in this case.”

“Exactly.” Mike breathes out a soft laugh. “So, uh, I hope you’re not busy tomorrow night.”

Despite the way El *really* doesn’t want to move, she lifts her head to look at him, eyebrow arched curiously. “Why?” she asks, smiling softly.

Mike returns the smile and El’s heart aches at just how handsome he is. “Because I made reservations for dinner tomorrow at 7:45.”

El’s smile turns brighter at Mike’s words. “You’re actually taking me on a date?”

“Of course,” Mike says, leaning in to press a soft kiss to her lips, making El sigh at the simple touch of his lips to hers. “I was going to even *without* your silly checklist.”

El jabs a finger into Mike’s ribcage, laughing as he squirms away from her touch. “Not silly,” she says. “I don’t know why I keep having to defend it, either.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Mike says, laughing a bit. “You’re just too much fun to tease.”

El rolls her eyes as she settles back against Mike, laying her head against his shoulder once more. “That’s it, I’m never introducing you to my younger brother. I’ll never get any peace.”

Mike’s still laughing, the sound echoing in his chest beneath her ear, and he shakes his head before giving her another kiss to the top of her head. “Ok, ok, I’m sorry. Also, you know I’ll stick up for you against your brother.”

El smiles, touched, but she’s still in a teasing mood. “Oh, I don’t know, you might decide that you like him more than me.”

Mike snorts. “Impossible. There’s no one I like more than you. I’m almost offended you’d suggest such a thing.”

El cranes her neck so she can press a soft kiss against Mike's jaw. "Sorry," she says, giggling. She sighs, feeling so very happy in this moment. "So, where are you taking me for dinner?"

"I take it that's a 'yes' to the date?" Mike asks in return and El doesn't have to look at him to know that he's smiling.

"That's a 'hell, yes', to be specific," El says. God, she's so happy, she almost doesn't know what to do with herself. "You were gonna tell me about where you're taking me?"

Mike breathes out a laugh. "I recall making no such promises, but if you insist." He tells her about the restaurant he made reservations for, his voice rumbling in her ear, reverberating throughout her entire body as she sits curled around him. El can't stop smiling as she sits, snuggled up against him, while he slowly runs his fingers through her hair, his other hand resting lightly against her back.

For a little while, as they talk, El lets herself believe that this is all there is, that nothing else exists but the two of them.

And, for now, it's enough.

Because, tomorrow, he's taking her out on a date.

Because, tomorrow, everything *really* begins.

Mike eventually has to leave her office - despite how much they both want him to stay, he also has work he has to do - so, after almost a half an hour of snuggling on her couch, they separate, promising to meet up for lunch in a little while. They trade a few long, lingering kisses before Mike heads off to his own office, both of them looking at each other like separating is the *last* thing they want to do.

El sighs once she's alone, all wistful and longing even though it's only been a few moments since Mike left her office, and it's with a heart that's a little heavier than it was moments before that she goes over to her desk, sitting down to follow up on the notes she made before

her morning got derailed by all things Mike Wheeler.

Still, she's a little - ok, *a lot* - on Cloud 9 as she more closely reads the emails she needs to catch up on and actually pays attention to the files of the incoming transfer students. Her heart beats a happy, satisfied rhythm and El finds herself unable to stop smiling, feeling like the best kind of lovesick.

She wants to always feel like this and, though she knows relationships always settle, that the glow of the honeymoon phase always fades, El hopes some of this feeling always remains. The thrill of a new relationship is one of the most amazing experiences ever and she hopes it just changes the longer they're together, not disappears entirely. Something tells her, though, that what she has with Mike is *always*, in some part, going to feel just like this and she can't wait to see what's next.

For a while, after Mike leaves, El exists in her quiet happiness, both content *and* eager for her upcoming lunch with Mike. But then a knock at her door startles her and she looks up, eyes wide, at who's coming to see her.

"Hi, we're not interrupting, are we?"

El smiles, looking over at the pair suddenly standing in her doorway.
"No, not at all, come in."

El watches as the two drama teachers, John and Grace West, walk into her office, sitting down in front of her desk. They're an odd pair, one El hasn't quite been able to figure out. For one, they're married (apparently, they were hired as a married pair), and, two, they're just...so very *theater*. They're very bohemian chic - her dressed in long, flowing skirts and peasant tops, him in three-piece, tweed suits. The students love them, though. They love hanging out in the drama room, with its comfy couches and eclectic decorations.

John is responsible for the technical side of theater productions, while Grace handles the artistic side of things, and El's seen the work they produce. It's amazing, even without factoring in that it's a high school production shop.

"We came by earlier," John says. "But your door was closed."

El blushes and ducks her head to hide it as best she can. "Um, yeah, sorry about that. I was...occupied."

She looks up to see the two of them giving her knowing smiles and she knows the secret's out. *Well, we weren't going to be able to hide it anyway.* "It's ok," Grace says. "We completely understand."

El sucks in a deep breath and tries to suppress the deep blush that's crawled onto her cheeks, but she knows she's unsuccessful, so she just tries to ignore it. "So, what is it you wanted?"

Grace and John share an excited, hopeful look before turning their attention back to her. "Well, we were hoping you wouldn't mind helping out with the spring musical," John says.

At that, El cocks her head to one side, her brow furrowing. "Why me?"

Grace smiles, her grin wide and toothy. "Well, we've been wanting to do 'Newsies' forever—"

"—but we've never had the dance expertise to pull it off," John says.

"And now that you're here," Grace says. "We think we could actually do it."

El blinks, caught off guard. "Oh," is all she says for a moment as she thinks about "Newsies". She's seen the movie and she knows there's a play of it and she remembers liking it when she saw it. She also knows the kind of dancing is predominantly tap and jazz, with a lot of tumbling thrown in for good measure, and though she has some experience with those styles of dance, she's not as experienced as she'd like to be.

But John and Grace are looking at her so hopefully, El can't say no. So, she smiles. "Of course, I'd be glad to help. Just let me know what you need."

"Oh, thank you, El, *thank you*," Grace says.

"We've already announced the play to the students via email, and there are fliers we're putting up today that'll be here when the students get back for classes," John says. "We want to hold auditions next Wednesday, at least preliminary ones."

El blinks. "Oh, that's...." She pauses, searching for a word. "Quick."

"Well, it is preliminary," Grace says.

"And we want to give people time to learn the dancing they're going to have to do," John says, following up.

El takes in a deep breath and smiles. "Well, tell me where I need to be, and when, and I'll be there," she says.

"Oh, El, *thank you*," Grace says, one hand coming up to press over her heart like she has the vapors, or something. "Thank you *so much*."

"It's no problem," El says with a wave of her hand. "I'm happy to help."

"Well, you won't regret this, I promise," John says, grinning almost blindingly.

There's a bit more conversation, a few more details El gets from the pair, before Grace and John see themselves out, all grateful smiles and effusive thanks, leaving El alone once more.

For a moment, she just sits there, going over the past 5 minutes, wondering what just happened...wondering what she just signed herself up for.

Well, regardless, she already said yes (which is effectively the same as promising, and El *never* breaks her promises), so now she's going to have brush up on her tap and jazz...and *quick* .

So, with a sigh, El reaches for her purse, fishing out her phone. A couple of moments later, she has her phone pressed to her ear, the sound of the call ringing in her ear. And, when the call picks up, El lets out a breath. "Robert? Hi, it's El. I have a favor to ask of you...."

When El tells him she's going to be helping with the spring musical, Mike can't help it: he laughs. "Oh my god, I can't *believe* you volunteered to help with the spring musical."

They're at a small bistro not far from campus - since classes aren't in session, there's actually *time* to go out to lunch, and given El didn't bring a lunch (and Mike's not about to eat without her), they decide to go off campus. It's a cute little place, only open for lunch on weekdays and brunch on the weekends, and it's not very crowded, which is nice, so Mike and El don't have to talk loudly in order to be able to hear each other.

Which is why Mike hears it *so clearly* when El tells him that the Wests convinced her to help out with the musical. "It's not funny!" El exclaims. "They look like they really need the help. But, yeah, I need to get proficient in tap and jazz dancing *quick*."

"But, how do you manage to volunteer for *extra* work?" Mike says, still laughing. "You *do* know anything theater related is not your job, right?"

He winces a second later when El reaches out with her foot and kicks him in the shin. "Hey, now," she says, eyebrow arched but lips fighting off what looks like a teasing grin. "No making fun of the woman you want to sleep with."

Mike arches an eyebrow right back, thinking back to just a few hours ago - *el pushing him down onto the couch in her office, the look on her face as she straddled his lap, the way she moved against him as he touched her under her sweater* - and he grins. "Right," he drawls out, entirely unconvinced. "Because like you're really going to be able to keep your hands off of me either way."

El breaks character, smiling almost dreamily, the look on her face making Mike want to lean over and kiss her. "Fine, you got me. Not my fault you're so irresistible."

Mike's smile widens as he leans towards her. "Just admit it, you want me," he says. He can't help it, the way his voice dips low, turning

husky - El's just so beautiful and she's looking at him like she never wants to look away.

"Hmm, I think I'd rather show you instead," El whispers, leaning towards him, eyes turning dark with desire as her gaze drops to his mouth.

"Do I have to remind you that we're in public?" Mike asks, drinking in the sight of her. She's *here*, right in front of him where he can touch her, real and beautiful and looking at him with those beautiful, brown eyes of hers.

"How about just a taste, then?" El asks, an impish smile dancing on her lips.

Mike chuckles. "Well, I suppose a taste wouldn't hurt," he says, leaning to close the distance between them. El meets him halfway in a *devouring* kiss, her mouth hot against his, the feel of her lips against his heavy with promise, tempting and supplicating. *God*, he wants her, wants to drown in the promise of her mouth and never come up for air. He moans softly against her mouth as he feels her hand slide up along his cheek and into his hair, her fingers carding through the thick black strands.

Mike deepens the kiss, shifting the angle of his mouth against hers in a way that makes her breath hitch audibly. He goes to lean in even more, to press himself even harder against her, but she pulls away so suddenly, Mike gasps, even as he's still chasing her lips.

He opens his eyes - *when did he close them?* - and looks down to see her still looking at him with that impish, teasing smile. Her cheeks are also flushed now, a pretty pink color spreading over the light tan of her skin. "Now who's forgetting we're in public?" El asks, a little breathless.

It takes a moment for Mike to remember how to form words. "I'm going to make tomorrow evening a night you won't ever forget," he says when he can finally speak again. He sounds too ragged to his own ears, too *needy*, but he doesn't care.

Not when El looks at him, wide-eyed and hopeful, sparkingly happy

with a smile on her face that could power the sun. “Is that a promise?” El asks, speaking through a low gasp.

“Oh, definitely,” Mike says as he reaches up to tuck her hair behind one ear, reveling in the way El shivers beneath his touch.

“Mmm, good,” El says, reaching up to give him one, last quick peck on the lips before she reaches for her water glass.

Mike laughs, a little breathlessly. “So,” he says, trying to get them back on track before that delicious little detour they went on. “You were telling me how you managed to, once again, volunteer for extra work.”

El giggles. “Right. So, I figure I have about a couple of weeks to be good enough at tap and jazz in order to teach the students for the musical.”

“How are you going to manage that?” Mike asks, reaching to take a bite of his sandwich.

El takes a sip of her water. “I called Robert a little bit ago. He’s really connected to the dance scene here in Chicago. A friend of his is going to teach me and my first lesson with him is Saturday evening.”

Mike grins. “You’re spending an evening with another man? Ms. Hopper, I’m *scandalized*. ”

El swats him with the back of her hand, hitting him on the upper arm. “Odds are, he’s gay, so you don’t have to worry. And if not, well....” She trails off, shrugging. “It’s not like anyone can compare to you, anyway.”

Mike feels himself swell with pride and he’s smiling so widely, it almost hurts. “Wasn’t jealous, by the way. But it’s nice to know you’re so hot and bothered for me, that there’s no other man who’ll do.” He says the words jokingly, but there’s a little bit of truth behind them.

El laughs, shaking her head, even as she’s rolling her eyes at him. “I don’t know how you manage it, but smug is somehow attractive on you.”

"It's a gift," Mike says, eyebrows wagging, which just makes El laugh harder.

The rest of lunch is light and teasing, and Mike's so happy it feels like he's going to float away and dissolve into pure emotion.

He drops her off at her office, where again, they trade long, lingering kisses that set him aflame even as every fiber of his soul fills with the deepest calm he's ever experienced. Like, his whole life has been spent just *waiting* to meet her, to be by her side, to hold her and kiss her just like he's doing right now.

They separate, because they still have work to do, but Mike can't stop smiling as he heads back to his office to finish up preparing for finals and doing some last grading leftover from before winter break.

And then, at 2:30, his phone buzzes with a series of incoming text messages, one after the other in quick, panicked succession.

911 - Urgent - CALL ME ASAP - DROP EVERYTHING MICHAEL I DON'T CARE IF YOU'RE AT WORK

The messages are from Kelly, his agent, and his heart leaps into his throat. What in the hell is so urgent? He's mostly finished with the third book of his series - having nothing to do except to write for almost a week and a half will do that - so it's not *that*. And Mike already sent back the papers, signed and notarized after his lawyer looked them over, to close the movie deal a few weeks back. So it can't be *that*, either.

For a second, Mike's mind spins out worst case scenarios. *They hate the third book. The movie studio wants to cancel the contract. Scholastic is DROPPING ME.*

Mike presses the pause button, closing his eyes to take in a deep breath. "No, stop this," he warns himself, taking in a deep breath to quell the panic that's bubbling in his stomach. "It's fine, I'm sure it's fine."

So, with one more deep breath, Mike grabs his phone and calls Kelly.

Kelly picks up even before the first ring is done, which speaks to her

urgency, and she sounds almost out of breath when she answers. “Oh, good, you actually *called* me.”

“Hi Kelly,” Mike says. “Is, um, everything ok?”

“Mike, everything is *fantastic*,” Kelly says, sounding happy and excited. “Representatives from Lionsgate called me this morning to let me know that they’re passing through Chicago and they want to meet with you, take you out to dinner.”

Oh, not bad at all! Mike smiles, relief rushing through him. “Oh, wow, that’s great! I’d love to meet with them, though I’m not sure *why* they’d want to meet with me. Um, when are they coming?”

“Michael,” Kelly says, almost chastising. “*Of course* they want to meet with you. Your books are lauded as this generation’s Harry Potter. Lionsgate is *thrilled* they were able to land the deal to make them into movies. But the urgency for this call is the short notice of the meeting. They’re passing through tomorrow and the only time they have to meet is tomorrow night.”

At that, Mike’s heart sinks. *His date with El is supposed to be for tomorrow.* He gulps, trying not to frown. “Does it *have* to be tomorrow? I, um...kind of already have plans.”

“Well, then, reschedule them,” Kelly says. “You have no idea how important this is, Mike. *No idea.* I’m sorry to have to ask you to arrange your schedule, but you can’t say no to this. Will it kill you to postpone your original plans?”

At this, Mike pouts, slumping in his desk chair. “No, I guess not,” he says, even as every fiber of his being is screaming *yes, yes it will!!* It’s just that El was just telling him that she has plans on Saturday night, now, ones she needs to keep for work reasons, and so his only options to take her out are either Sunday, which is a school night...or to wait until next weekend. Sure, he could take her out mid-week...but the kinds of plans he has for their night together *do not* factor in having to wake up to go to work the next day. But, if he has to, then...well, he supposes that could work. *Need to call the restaurant, see when I can reschedule my reservation for.*

“Good,” Kelly says, interrupting Mike’s internal anguish. “I’ll text you the details. Trust me when I say that you won’t regret this, Mike.”

Mike smiles, leaning forward so his elbows are resting against the surface of his desk. Logically, he knows this is a good thing for his writing career and he really is grateful to Kelly for looking out for him on that front. “Thanks, Kelly. And I do trust you.”

“It’s what you pay me for,” Kelly says, voice light and teasing. But Mike can hear the underlying warmth in her voice and he’s so glad he has her as his agent.

“Will you be at the dinner, too?” Mike asks.

“I will,” Kelly says. “No offense, Mike, but you need someone with you who can talk business.”

Mike rolls his eyes, but he laughs despite himself. “Gee, thanks.” He takes in a deep breath. “See you tomorrow, then?”

“Yep, see you tomorrow. And remember to dress nicely, ok? I can guarantee you they’re going to take us to a really nice restaurant.”

“I promise I won’t look like a slob,” Mike says. “Give me a little credit, at least.”

“I guess I can afford you that,” Kelly says. “Alright, then, take care, Mike. And I’ll see you later.”

“Bye, Kelly.”

Mike hangs up the phone and slumps back in his chair, breathing out a harsh sigh that puffs out his cheeks. He leans back even more, groaning and pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes.

God dammit.

With one more sigh, Mike pushes himself up from his chair. *Welp, better go tell El we have to postpone our date.*

“...so, then my mom goes, ‘Well, good to know at least *someone* is going to bed satisfied tonight.’ And then she looked at Neil with the most withering look I’ve ever seen. Like, I’m surprised I still *have* a step-father who’s living and breathing. It was the ultimate definition of ‘if looks could kill.’”

El lets out a dry, humorless laugh and claps a hand lightly over her eyes. “Oh my god, Max. *Why* aren’t they divorced yet?”

Max looks at her from across the table of the pizza place they’re eating at for dinner and rolls her eyes. “God, I don’t know,” she scoffs. “Because they’re both gluttons for punishment? So, yeah, *that’s* what going home for Christmas was like. You can see why I escaped early and came home to Chicago for New Years.”

“Gee, and your mother wonders why you never come home to visit.”

Max snorts. “The North Pole would be a warmer place to go visit, I swear to fucking god.”

El shakes her head, sighing softly. “I’m sorry. The holidays shouldn’t suck so bad.”

“Well, everyone isn’t blessed like you are, with your happy home back in Hawkins,” Max says. “Your mom being the exception. Sorry,” she adds a beat later, looking sheepish.

“It’s ok,” El says, shrugging it off. “I know what you mean.”

Max takes a bite of what pizza is left, following it swiftly with a sip from her beer. “So, Lover Boy had to reschedule, yeah?”

El pouts a little. “Don’t call him ‘Lover Boy’.”

“I don’t know,” Max says, eyebrows arched teasingly. “He seems to have earned that moniker given that hickey I see peeking out from beneath the collar of your shirt, there.”

Startled, El’s hand comes up quickly to cover the spot on her skin that’s now throbbing with the memory from only a few hours ago.

(lunch in her office which quickly turns to making out. his mouth on her collarbone, having pushed aside the fabric of her blouse, latching on to the spot just below where the bone meets her shoulder. she gasps and moans against him, which only makes him suck harder, tongue caressing the spot with dizzying strokes. god, the things his mouth can do to her...the things she wants his mouth to do her.

later, he smooths his fingers across the spot, murmuring an apology, but she cuts him off with a kiss, her mouth hot against his. she tells him, then, that she doesn't mind it if he marks her and the look that crosses his face makes her want to ditch the rest of the afternoon and find somewhere where they can be fully and completely alone.)

“Ooh,” Max says. “Now you’re blushing. Reliving the memory?”

El glares at her. “Oh, shut up.”

Max snickers. “Wow, sexual frustration is *not* a good look on you, just FYI.”

Just thinking about how frustrated she is makes El remember what she had planned for the evening - plans that are now *ruined*. “Dammit, Max,” she says, letting out a very petulant whine. “I was gonna seduce him tonight.”

“Well, from the sounds of it, you weren’t going to have to try *hard*,” Max says with a smirk.

El ignores the remark and continues on whining. “I had the perfect outfit and *everything*. And now I have to wait until Sunday and it’s *not fair*.”

Max gives her a look. “Oh, boo hoo, you have to wait two extra days to get laid. How *awful* for you.”

For a moment, the needy side of El completely agrees. Yes, *it is awful*.

When Mike came into her office yesterday afternoon, she’d been happy to see him until he told her the news - that he needed to postpone their date because people from the movie studio he’d signed with wanted to meet with him and his agent pretty much told him he couldn’t say no.

El understood - still does, actually - and she knows Mike hated having to tell her as much as she hated hearing it. He'd pouted the entire time, looking all sad like someone had kicked his puppy, and he apologized profusely until El silenced him with a soft kiss, pulling him towards her with her fingers wrapped in his sweater.

They rescheduled for Sunday, not wanting to wait until *next* weekend, pushing dinner to earlier in the evening to have more time together - 6 instead of 7:45 - and El's plans suddenly got another 48 hours to sit around and *wait*.

And she's not entirely convinced she's not going to die of sheer frustration before then.

Pretty much from the moment she kissed him in her office yesterday morning, reuniting with him after *too long* spent apart, she knew she was going to break her 'no sex on the first date' rule. And when she found out he was going to take her on that first official date the very next day? Well, her mind went into overdrive, spinning and planning, thinking about what to wear...including *underneath* her clothes. Because she knew then, as she still knows now, that she's not going to be able to resist, that she's not going to want to say good night.

Because when Mike drops her off after their date, El's going to invite him inside this time...and into her bed.

Which was supposed to be tonight, the needy part of her thinks, frustrated with the delay. She blames this entirely on Mike. He's just so *attractive* and he makes her want him so bad, it almost robs her of her ability to think.

El's mature enough to know that shit happens, that Mike has a really good reason for pushing their date back a few days. And, honestly, she wouldn't want him to skip meeting with the people who are going to turn his books into movies. It's really the best move for his writing career and she wouldn't be a very supportive friend, much less girlfriend, if she insisted on keeping their original Friday night date plans.

God, she hopes it's going well. El takes a moment to think about where Mike might be right now - probably at a nice restaurant, sitting at a

table with business executive type people - and she makes a note to ask him how it went. *I'll call him later tonight*, she thinks, the thought warming her from within.

Still doesn't help with her current frustration level, though.

But then El focuses on the tone in Max's voice and she cringes, feeling bad for whining about this when Max is still single. "Sorry," she says, taking in a deep breath. "I know, things could be so much worse."

"You got that right," Max says, huffing out a sigh, frowning just a little.

At that, El narrows her eyes, head tilting to one side, thoroughly and curiously suspicious. "Wait...are you *envious* of me?"

At that, Max scoffs, throwing up what El knows to be her 'tough face' - impervious, invincible Max Mayfield staring back at her from across the table. "What? No, no way. I don't have time for a relationship. I mean, I'm *super* focused on my career. Why would I ruin that by getting a guy involved?" she says, gaze bouncing back and forth between meeting El's and glancing down at the table.

Good thing El's fluent in Max's bullshit because El can see right through her, even if no one else would be able to. "Uh-huh," El says, leaning back so her arms can cross over her chest. "Max, I've known you since the 1st grade. There's *nothing* you can get past me."

El mentally applauds the way that Max holds her gaze for a solid two seconds before her brave face seems to give up the ghost, as it were. "God, *fine*," Max says, almost so softly El can't hear her over the din of the restaurant. "I'm *lonely*, ok?" she says, looking at El, seeming sad and dejected in a way that is just so not like her, it makes El's heart squeeze painfully in her chest.

"Max, I'm sorry," El says, reaching out across the table to place a hand on Max's forearm.

"I've been trying online dating - I haven't told you because, like, *all* of them have been horrible and haven't lasted past the first date. I've

been trying for months and it's not working and I'm—" Max cuts off, lips pinching together as she goes a little ashen.

"You're, what?" El prompts, gently, like Max will bolt if she pushes too hard.

Max takes in a deep breath, letting it out in a sigh. "I'm scared my mom's right, that I'm past my prime, that there isn't a guy out there who's going to want to put up with me and all my attitude. And I know it's stupid. Like, I don't *need* a guy in my life. I just...."

"You just want to be wanted, to have someone by your side," El finishes.

"Yeah," Max sighs, a soft smile pulling at the corners of her mouth as she gets lost in a tiny daydream. "And kissing. Kissing's really nice."

El thinks to the times she's spent in the last day and a half with Mike, to the kisses they've shared and the way it makes her feel, and she sighs as well, feeling lovesick in the best way possible. "Yeah, kissing is *really* good."

Max looks at her, head tilted just a little, and she shrugs. "And I'm just watching you have this amazing, storybook romance - and believe me when I say that I've seen you in the early stages of a relationship and this is different. I think you found your person, El, I really do - and I can't help but want something similar."

"You'll find it, I promise," El says. "The right guy is out there for you somewhere."

Max snorts. "Yeah, well he's not *here*, is he?"

El opens her mouth to respond, but a voice from a distance cuts her off. "Janie, what are you doing here?"

El turns to see the source of the voice, one she recognizes, and she smiles broadly, even as she's rolling her eyes. It's Dustin, with Lucas standing off to his right. "Well, if it isn't Frick and Frack!" she teases before her gaze lands on Megan, who's standing on the other side of Dustin, her arm entwined with his. "And Frick's better half." Her smile softens. "Hi, Megan."

Megan lets out a light laugh. “Hi, El.” Megan, like Greg, calls El by her preferred name...and not that inane nickname. But, on the other hand, Will, Dustin, and Lucas have been calling her “Janie” for so long that, as much as El hates the nickname, she’s not sure how she would feel if they stopped. *God, knowing her luck, she’d miss it.*

El looks back at Dustin, to answer his earlier question. “I’m having dinner with a friend on this beautiful Friday night. What are you guys doing?”

“Just finished up dinner, actually,” Dustin says. “Heading out to meet Will and Greg for drinks.”

El smirks, thinking of the mysterious 4th Party member. “What, no Paladin tonight?”

Dustin grins, amused and bright. “He’s got a hot date tonight with that hot teacher woman of his,” Dustin says, chuckling, before he moves to elbow Lucas in the side. “Eh, Lucas?” Dustin asks, trying to get Lucas to join him in his amusement.

Hot teacher woman? El thinks for a fleeting second, confused, before deciding that she *really* doesn’t want to know. Especially not when her attention focuses on Lucas, who’s standing next to Dustin with a mildly shell-shocked look on his face, glancing shyly at the floor every few seconds.

Brow furrowing and Dustin’s teasing words completely forgotten, El follows the line of Lucas’ gaze when it’s not directed at the floor, head turning slowly until she’s looking over at Max...

...Who’s currently blushing lightly, trying (and horribly failing) not to look back at Lucas out of the corner of her eye.

El bites the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling. *Oh.* Suddenly, her mind’s racing, plans upon plans spinning up at lightning speed. But she pushes the excited fervor aside as she glances back over at Dustin and the others. “Oh, I’m sorry, I’m being rude.” She looks at Max. “Max, these are my friends from Hawkins: Dustin, Megan, and Lucas,” she says, gesturing to each in turn. “Guys, this is Max...or, as I like to call her, MadMax.”

Dustin guffaws, Megan giggles, and Lucas just looks even more in awe - especially when Max leans over and punches El on the arm. "Oh my god, you are the *worst* friend ever. You and your goddamn nicknames."

El laughs, even as she lifts a hand to rub the sore spot on her upper arm. "Hey, *you* were the one who started it back in middle school. *I* just maintained it."

"*MadMax*, like the movies?" Lucas asks, speaking up for the first time since approaching El's table. He's standing like he doesn't know what to do with his arms, like he's torn between putting his hands in his pockets and crossing his arms over his chest and is just stuck in the middle, fidgeting endlessly.

"Y-yeah," Max says, suddenly a little embarrassed, almost demurely so. "I, um, really used to like them when I was a kid," she says, moving her head so she can gently toss her ponytail behind her from where it's fallen in front of her shoulder.

"You still like them *now*," El says with a snort.

At this, Max blushes. "Yeah, well-"

"They're cool movies," Lucas says, rushing to get the words out, looking more bashful than El's *ever* seen him.

This whole thing is *literally* the most precious thing she's ever seen in her entire life: stubborn, level-headed, sarcastic Lucas Sinclair and hot-headed, smart-assed, take-no-prisoners Max Mayfield, looking at each other like a couple of blushing school children, all shy and cute and trying so hard to hide it (they would have succeeded, too, if El didn't know both of them as well as she does).

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Max," Dustin says, reaching to shake Max's hand.

Max accepts the gesture, lift her hand from where it's fidgeting with beveled edge of her fork handle. "Nice to meet you, too," she says. Megan and Lucas follow suit, each of them shaking Max's hand, and if Lucas' hold lingers a little longer than the others (and if Max *lets*

him), no one remarks on it.

But El can't help but do a mental happy dance.

Her eyes meet Dustin's and it's like she has telepathy, or something, because she just *knows* what he's thinking.

And then Dustin smiles, knowingly - *plottingly* - before he looks away, turning to Megan and Lucas. "Well, we should get going - Will and Greg are probably waiting for us."

El smiles. "Tell that no-good step-brother of mine and the love of his life I say hi."

Megan quirks an eyebrow. "You guys wanna join? We're going to be at a bar just around the corner."

"Oh, I...." El trails off as she looks over at Max, who's giving her a wide-eyed panicked look. "...Don't think so," El finishes. "I think we're just going to have a girls night. Next time, though, yeah?"

Promises made to go out for drinks at some unspecified time in the future, Dustin, Megan, and Lucas head out to meet up with Will and Greg. El doesn't watch them go, though. She watches *Max* watch them go, her eyes trained on Lucas the entire time.

And, when they disappear from sight, El smiles, leaning back in her chair once more, arms again crossed over her chest. "So, I take it you saw something you liked," El teases, aware of the shit-eating grin on her face and completely unable to do anything about it.

Max whirls around so fast to look back at El that El's surprised she doesn't get whiplash. "Don't you dare, Hopper," Max says, eyes narrowed.

El gives Max the most innocent look she can muster. "What? You mean to say you *weren't* looking at Lucas like he's the best thing since sliced bread? I mean, I don't get it personally - I've known him *way* too long - but if that's what gets you going, I can certainly understand it."

"I fucking hate you," Max says, one hand coming up so her forehead

can rest against her palm.

"Oh, you love me and you know it," El says.

Max make a noise that is all frustrated denial, before she sighs and looks back up at El. "He's not...single, is he?"

Yes, victory . El smiles. "Oh, he's completely single. Why, you want me to set you up?"

Max blushes to the roots of her hair and reaches out, hand clamping down on El's forearm. "No, don't you dare!" she says in a screaming whisper. A moment later, she realizes just how vehement that protestation was, it seems, and she removes her hand, slinking to lean back in her seat. "It's just..." She lets out a harsh sigh. "Let's just forget it, please? Clearly I've had too much alcohol; making me desperate or something." Max looks at her with barely veiled desperation, practically *begging* El to go along with it.

El knows this is clearly a lie - Max is only on her second beer and she can drink just about anyone under the table. But El also knows that this making Max uncomfortable and there's only so far she can handle teasing Max until it starts to feel cruel. "Yeah, sorry, I won't mention it again."

Max sighs, this time with relief. "Thank you."

The conversation restarts after a few, tense silent moments, both of them enjoying their night out together (even if El originally had *drastically* different plans; ones of the romantic and sensual variety).

But, the entire time, El is still thinking about how Max and Lucas reacted to each other...

And that she *has* to do something about it.

But what exactly?

This is, far and away, the *nicest* restaurant Mike has ever been to in his entire life.

And he feels *so* very out of his depth.

Around him, the low din of the other restaurant patrons surrounds him as he takes a small sip from his wine glass and resists the urge to adjust his tie. Which, is ridiculous, really. It's not like he's not *used* to wearing a tie - it's just that he's nervous and feeling a little (*a lot*) like a fish out of water.

Calm down, it's just a really nice steakhouse, Mike thinks, making sure to keep his hand steady as he sets his glass back down. And it is a *really* nice steakhouse - low, recessed lighting accented with modern chandeliers; dark wood wainscoting beneath pristine beige walls; the glass walls of the wine cellar near the center of the restaurant, displaying a vast and expensive collection of wine and spirits; strategically spaced tables with high backed, cushioned chairs and crisp, white tablecloths; the air filled with the enticing smell of cooked steak and melted butter.

But it's *not* a romantic Italian restaurant with small, intimate booths and candlelit tables where he's sitting across from the most beautiful woman he's ever been lucky enough to meet, much less *be with*.

Yeah, to say that Mike's disappointed would be an understatement-
(*goddammit, he had plans to seduce her. his evening should be ending with him making love to the most amazing woman ever. but it's not. because he's here instead.*

man, being an adult with responsibilities sucks sometimes.)

-and that disappointment is feeding right into his anxiety.

Next to him, sits Kelly, her short blonde hair coiffed perfectly in a sleek bob, all business professional in her silk blouse and skirt, talking animatedly, if professionally, with the two representatives from the movie studio. They're both men, not that Mike's surprised, both older than him by about 15 years or so. The one who Mike thinks is in charge between the both of them is a solidly built Asian

man and the other is taller, slimmer, and about as white as Mike is. Which, is to say, practically translucent.

They're both Senior Directors of, um...something Mike's completely forgotten and he feels so very out of his element as Kelly talks with them about projections and market trends and cross-functional synergies. Business speak is like a foreign language and Mike is so happy Kelly's there to fill in the silence Mike's leaving in his wake.

But, eventually, general talk of business turns to, well, talk of more *specific* business, as one of the two men, the one in charge, looks over at Mike and gives him a jovial smile. "So, Mike, Kelly here was telling me earlier that you're just about finished with the third book."

Mike's *pretty* sure his name is Peter, with his taller partner going by Sean, but he's not going to guess, so he makes sure not to mention either of their names. "Um, yes, that's right. I had a lot of time over the holidays - I'm a teacher as my day job, so we get winter break. So I just cranked it out, I suppose."

"Do you want to keep teaching? Even after signing with us?" Sean asks before taking a bite of his salad course.

"I do," Mike says, smiling. "I love teaching as much as I love writing and I'm lucky that my two professional passions can co-exist the way that they do."

Peter nods, still smiling. "That's awesome, Mike. Really, a very envious position. Not many people are that lucky."

"I know," Mike says, thinking about all the ways in which he's been blessed, amazed at his good fortune. "Sometimes, I can't believe it, myself."

"And you're still young, too, with so much time ahead of you," Sean says. "Plenty of time to change your mind as you get older."

Mike shrugs. "I guess," he says. "Though it feels like this is what I'm going to end up doing with my life."

"Also gives you time to settle down eventually," Peter says. "Have a family. You married?"

At the question, Mike blushes, but he can't stop from smiling, even as he feels Kelly's gaze on him, wondering and a little confused from what he can see out of the corner of his eye. "Um, no, not yet," he says. "I am seeing someone, though."

"Looks like young love to me from that smile on your face," Sean says.

"It might just be," Mike says, laughing a bit. "It's still pretty new, though. But, she's...she's something really special. Too good for me, that's for sure."

Peter smiles, tilting his head in a way that Mike knows is the end of this particular line of conversation. Which is a shame. Because Mike can talk about El all damn night. Or, forever, really. She's his favorite topic...his favorite, *period*. "So, Mike," Peter says, tone falsely light in a way that makes Mike know he was right about the upcoming conversation shift. "One of the reasons we came out here was to meet you and get to know you; you've become very important to the studio and we always like to get to know the people who collaborate with us." Peter reaches out and grabs his wine glass by the stem, pausing to lift it so he can take a sip. "Which brings me to the second reason we came out here."

"And what might that be?" Kelly asks, brow furrowed, voice confused and politely concerned.

"We want you to take first crack at writing the screenplay for the first movie," Peter says. "And we want to offer you the opportunity to be an Executive Producer."

Something on Mike's face must be giving away what he's feeling - shock, no small amount of panic, excitement, all mixing into one almost overwhelming morass of emotion - because Sean gives him what Mike thinks is a reassuring smile. "We want you to be something of a consultant during the production process. We've seen a lot of success with keeping authors involved when turning their books into movies. And we think we could have a hit with Hunter Academy series."

"Which is why we want you to do the first draft of the screenplay,"

Peter says. “There’s no one more familiar with the world and story you’ve created than, well... *you*.”

“Wow, that’s quite an offer,” Kelly says, looking beyond pleased, foot reaching out to deliver a swift kick to Mike’s ankle.

For his part, Mike barely flinches, though he *definitely* feels it. He’s too shocked still, though, as he looks back and forth between the two movie studio representatives, mouth hanging open, feeling a little bit like a literal fish, all gaping mouth and wide eyes. “Even though I’ve never written a screenplay before?”

Sean smiles reassuringly. “Don’t worry. We have people who can tighten it up and make it polished enough for production.”

Oh, if that’s the case.... Mike knows it would be foolish to turn down the opportunity, even without Kelly looking at him like she’s *begging* him to see sense. To have his name (well, his *pen name*) credited as both Executive Producer *and* Screenwriter? He could do *anything* in the entertainment world: write books, make movies, even write TV shows. Mike smiles and tries to come across as more confident than he’s feeling right in this moment. “Well, I’d love to give it a shot. At least the first draft of it.”

At that, Peter reaches over from where he’s sitting next to Mike to clap him on the arm. “That’s what I like to hear. Now, we’d love if it we could get that first draft by next Friday, end of business. That sound doable?”

Peter’s looking at him with confident, hopeful eyes and Mike can’t help but find himself falling under the spell of that level of faith in his ability. “Oh, absolutely,” Mike says, nodding and grinning eagerly, feeling like maybe he’s found his feet beneath him in this strange, unsteady world he’s found himself in.

“Mike’s an amazing writer, as you know,” Kelly says. “He can absolutely meet that deadline. I’m sure of it.” She looks over at him and smiles, pride and excitement in her eyes, and Mike’s confidence in himself just *explodes*.

The rest of the dinner goes by swimmingly, Mike already half focused

on the initial overarching story of the screenplay - what to keep from the book, what can go, some of the key transitions. There's a celebratory scotch at the end of the night, a nice 20 year Highland that drinks like liquid silk, it's so smooth. He goes home feeling like he's on top of the world professionally, a smile all but permanently etched on his face.

Mike knows it's going to be a lot of work, he reasons with himself as he puts away his coat and shucks off his dress shoes. There's going to be nothing but late nights between now and next Friday. He *knows* this.

But he's still *so excited* for what this could mean, for the challenge of the opportunity, and that feeling bubbles up inside of him until he feels like he's going to burst.

So, naturally, he has to share it with *someone* and there's only one person who immediately comes to mind.

El.

It's just after 10:30 as Mike makes his way upstairs, pleasantly full and somewhere between buzzed and tipsy, already reaching for his phone. He multitasks on his way up, one hand loosening his tie and unbuttoning his dress shirt while the other thumbs through his phone so he can call El.

She picks up only a couple of rings into the call and Mike can't help but smile when her voice reaches his ear. "Mike, hi," she says, soft and fond.

"Hi," he says, turning so he can flop back onto his bed, still dressed with his shirt all but unbuttoned, partially tucked into his pants.

"I wanted to call to see how your dinner was, but I didn't know when it was going to be over," El says. Her voice is a like a warm cocoon, wrapping around every fiber of his being, and Mike wants to hold that feeling close, wants to never let it go.

"Just got home," he says. "It was good. *Really* good."

El giggles. "Yeah? You sound a little drunk."

"Hmm, not drunk," Mike says, eyes slipping shut. "Tipsy and full. But really excited."

"Was it worth skipping our date for?" El asks.

Mike sighs, shifting on his bed so he's laying fully on it. "No, nothing could be worth that. But it was close, El. It was really close."

"Tell me about it, then," El says. "I want to know *everything*."

So, because it's her and him, because she asked so sweetly, Mike does.

After all, he could never deny her *anything*.

It's been almost 24 hours and Dustin can't stop thinking about that friend of El's, the woman with the fiery red hair.

He's not attracted to her, though. Max is undeniably beautiful, but not quite Dustin's type. No long blonde hair or lush hourglass curves or sparkling, dimpling smile - none of the things that makes Dustin wake up every morning next to Megan feeling like the luckiest man alive.

No, Dustin can't stop thinking about Max...because of his best friend, because he's never seen Lucas *so enamored* with someone just about ever.

And it makes Dustin's mind spin with the possibilities.

Lucas has never had the best luck with women and Dustin's not quite sure why, exactly. He thinks, sometimes, that it has something to do with Lucas' headstrong personality, logical and overbearing at times, and almost cockily sure of himself. Lucas has a hard time letting his guard down, letting that stoic wall go, and he can come across as cold sometimes, which is *definitely* a turn-off.

But Lucas is a great guy - one of the best, in Dustin's opinion - and

Dustin really wants him to be happy. It's nothing less than Lucas deserves.

And the way Lucas had stared at Max, the way he'd been half-distracted and practically lovesick the rest of the evening after, makes Dustin want to figure out a way to get the two of them back in the same room.

Because, if Dustin isn't mistaken, Max was looking at Lucas the same way he was looking at her.

But, what to do about it?

The question has invaded his entire Saturday, rattling around in the back of his brain as he goes about his day.

He's on the couch in his apartment, Megan snuggled up against his side with her head pillowed on his shoulder - it's one of her favorite positions, claiming that his lack of collarbones makes him extra snuggly, and Dustin's somehow never been more glad of his condition in his entire life.

(god, he loves her so much. what would he do without her?)

On the TV in front of them, "Breaking Bad" is playing. They're halfway through the series, having never caught it when it first released, and they're both riveted.

Or, they *usually* are both riveted.

Megan's rapt with attention while Dustin's distracted by how to set up his friend with this woman they both just met last night, so he's not exactly paying attention to the new twists and turns in Walter White's life.

He must be more obvious about it than he thought because, suddenly, Megan reaches over for the remote and presses the pause button. She pulls back a second later, looking up at him with slightly annoyed worry. "Ok, what's going on in that brain of yours?" she asks, lips pursed.

Dustin shakes his head even as he breathes out a laugh - *dammit,*

caught. “Just thinking about Lucas and how he reacted to meeting Janie’s friend last night.”

It’s a testament to how long they’ve been together that it only takes Megan a second to grin mischievously. “You’re trying to figure out a way to set them up, aren’t you?”

Dustin snaps his finger and points at her, crowing with victory. “Ha! I’m not the only one who noticed the way they were looking at each other!”

Megan rolls her eyes, but it’s a fond gesture. “It was pretty obvious. I think El noticed, too, by the way she was smiling. You should call her, see what you two can come up with.”

Megan is usually the first to call out Dustin for his crazy schemes - something he’s steadfastly held onto into adulthood - so Dustin’s jaw drops a little. “Wait, you’re ok with my desire to come up with a scheme to set up my best friend, thus by ensuring his future happiness?”

Megan giggles and, *god*, he loves that sound. “Well, I think you’re getting a little ahead of yourself there, but Lucas seemed quite taken with her and I think it’s worth a shot if he could be happy and - *Dustin!*” Megan cuts off with a squeal of laughter as Dustin wraps his arms around her and tackles her onto the couch, trapping her beneath his body.

Dustin can’t help himself. He just loves her *so much*. She’s the most supportive woman he’s ever met, always ready with a smile and a kind word of encouragement or a reassuring hug if things go wrong. She’s his ultimate cheerleader and the person he trusts the most on the face of this Earth, Party be damned. He never wants to live without her. *Ever.*

Dustin looks down at her, all smiles and jubilant happiness. “You’re something else, Megan Shaughnessy.”

Megan looks up at him with sparkling eyes and, suddenly, what’s on the TV is the *last* thing on Dustin’s mind. “Hmm, something good...or something *bad?*” she asks, lips curling with a teasing grin, one that

gets Dustin's heart racing, all thoughts of Lucas and Max and El falling by the wayside as she looks up at him with those eyes.

Lucas who?

Dustin doesn't answer Megan's question. Instead, he leans over and captures her lips in a kiss that makes both of them gasp, his fingers weaving into her hair, her hand coming up to cup the side of his neck.

They lose themselves in each other, caught up in the love that surrounds them, wholly and completely wrapped up in the feelings that exist between them like planets caught in a binary star system - orbiting back and forth, shared equally and intensely.

It's only later - *much later* - that Dustin remembers Megan's suggestion to call El, to see what can be done about Lucas and Max.

So, while Megan's in the shower, Dustin fishes out his phone from his pants pocket and calls El.

El picks up a few rings later and Dustin can practically hear the roll in her eyes as she greets him. "Well, hello there, Dusty."

"Aww, Janie, how nice to hear your voice!"

A sigh. "You called me, dumbass," El says, wry but fond. "What's up?"

Dustin smiles and settles back down in bed, head cradled by the pillows. "Oh, please, we both know why I'm calling."

"I do have to admit, I was curious who was going to break first, you or me," El says. "But, really, I'm more curious about what plans your devious little brain has hatched to set up my best friend with your best friend."

Dustin lets out a laugh. "Ah, you know me too well, Princess."

El giggles. "Well, you always have the most interesting plans and, at the very least, I know they'll be amusing. Besides, they somehow manage to always work out in one way, shape, or form, so I'm also

always a little impressed.”

It’s about one of the nicest things El’s ever said to him - not that Dustin doesn’t know El cares about him, or anything, they just haven’t had the time since she’s been in Chicago to reconnect on a one-on-one basis. Hell, this might be the first time since he was in college that he’s had a private conversation with her.

And he can’t deny that he’s touched by her compliment. Because, at the end of the day, Dustin cares about her. She’s been part of his life for so long, it feels like, that it’s hard sometimes to remember that she wasn’t always there. And, suddenly, Dustin’s *really* excited that El’s living in Chicago, that he can take the time to get to know her again.

“I knew you were always impressed with my schemes,” Dustin says, teasing to try and cover up a little the regard in his voice.

“So, Master General Schemer, sir,” El says, teasing right back. “What did you have in mind?”

Dustin smiles, cheeks almost hurting from the force of it. “Well, we start off simple - no need to spook them. I don’t know about Max, but Lucas is as skittish as a newborn colt when it comes to this stuff.”

“Max, too, if I’m being honest,” El chimes in. “Alright, simple. Simple is good. So walk me through it.”

Dustin sits up, too excited to keep laying down, hands gesturing as he begins explaining. *God, this is going to be fantastic.* “So, I was thinking...”

Mike’s conversation with El on Friday somehow manages to make him feel even *more* proud and excited - she’s *thrilled* at the opportunity he’s getting and is more than effusive with praise, telling him how proud she is of him and that she knows he can do it, that he can write a screenplay in a week.

So, given all that, it's no surprise that Mike wakes up on Saturday feeling both inspired and energized. He sits down in his home office, half full mug of coffee left over from breakfast perched next to his laptop, and gets right to it. It's not even 9 in the morning and he's raring to go, itching to get this done.

Added to this drive, this *urgency*, is the simple fact that, the more he can get done before tomorrow night, the more time he has for his date with El tomorrow night. He doesn't want *anything* getting in the way of going out with El tomorrow. Not when he's been wanting to for so long and they've already had to wait way longer than either of them want to.

The knowledge of their date dances around in the back of his head, popping into the forefront of his mind whenever he takes a break from writing. If Mike wasn't able to admit just how head over heels he is for El, the level of excitement he has over their date would disturb him. As it is, he can barely keep from vibrating with excitement, all smiles and almost giddy laughter, pounding heart and rapid breathing.

For the most part, though, Mike's able to keep a lid on those thoughts, focusing with laser-like intensity on writing this screenplay. The only interruption is when Dustin calls him partway through Saturday night, announcing an impromptu dinner party on Wednesday (because, and Mike can quote, "Megan wants to belatedly host something for the holidays since we were all away. Plus, you still need to meet Janie *and* she'll be there.") Mike promises to be there, even though he knows he won't be able to stay for long; odds are, he'll be right in the crunch of this screenplay. He really needs all the time he can get and taking time off from work is not an option, not with finals coming up for the students.

Mike figures he can set the screenplay aside for dinner, though. After all, he *does* have to eat. And Megan's a really good cook, which is one of the reasons Mike's sure Dustin is completely and totally in love with her.

(Besides, there's something in Dustin's voice when he explains the purpose of this dinner that has Mike intrigued. So now Mike *has* to go, even if only to find out what mischief Dustin is planning *this*

time.)

So other than the strange call from Dustin (and the occasional, supportive text message from El cheering him on - *god, he loves her and he can't wait to show her how much*), Mike spends the entire day in isolation, hunched over his laptop, eyes boring into the screen.

At first, everything seems to go well. He starts with a rough outline, which is really just a high-level list of the crucial scenes, and goes from there, writing scene by scene, trying to get it perfect, trying to just *nail* the action and stage direction.

It really doesn't take long for Mike to realize that this is going to be *a lot* harder than he originally thought.

It takes him nearly 3 hours, and almost as many restarts, to get that first scene done. The first time, it's too long; the second, the words are all wrong and the dialogue is *awful*.

It's just the learning curve, Mike thinks to himself, trying not to let the sinking feeling that's bubbling up in his stomach invade the whole of his body.

But then the second scene takes almost as long, and then the third, and it's only when he breaks for dinner that he realizes he's not even finished with 6 scenes and he has 15 more to go. And those are just the crucial ones, never mind all the connective tissue that he *knows* has to go into this screenplay.

Holy shit, what has he gotten himself into?

For a moment, Mike leans into despair while he eats dinner, consisting of a quick meal of frozen pizza. He has just under a week to produce a screenplay and, by his calculations, he's going to need at least a couple of weeks at the rate he's going. It might not just be improbable, but actually *impossible* to get this screenplay done in time and he's wondering why in the hell he agreed to give this a shot, why he *promised* he could do this.

God, why do I sign up for this shit? Why do I think I can do these things? Who trusts me with anything?

But, the second he thinks that, another, *stronger* feeling emerges from beneath the panic, steadfast and steel-reinforced, like a phoenix rising from the ashes of his confidence.

It's the famous Mike Wheeler stubbornness, which when life says *no*, it rises up and says *the fuck I can't*.

No, he can do this. Mike *knows* he can do this.

He just needs to try something different, something he hasn't tried in ages.

Mike's been approaching this like a novel - where details are key and the images are painted with words that are read off a page.

But a screenplay is an oral story at the end of the day, something to be *performed*, to keep the audience at the edge of their seat awaiting each and every word.

Just like a campaign.

The smile that spreads across Mike's face is triumphant, chest swelling with pride and relief, and he feels like he's on top of the world. He quickly gets back work with renewed determination, pushing through his exhaustion, fingers flying across his keyboard at what feels like breakneck speeds.

Mike chooses to start over again, throwing out an entire day's worth of work, but with his mindset shifted, it flows so much better. He feels like he's 10 again, caught in the grips of writing a campaign, thinking about all the ways to make his friends gasp and lean forward with eager excitement as he leads them down the twists and turns of a riveting adventure. It's addicting, feeling like this after *so very long* and Mike can't get enough of it.

Mike finds he can't stop working as the evening continues, so caught up in his own creation. His head pounds, his eyes become gritty and dry, and still he keeps working, like he's gripped by fever.

It's only when he almost falls over in his chair, at 2:30 in the morning, that Mike decides enough is enough. He's well past the limits of his endurance and he *needs* to go to bed. He'll wake up in a

relative handful of hours, feeling refreshed and ready to keep going.

Just a quick recharge of the batteries, he thinks as he dresses for sleep, exchanging his jeans and t-shirt for a simple pair of flannel PJ pants. *Just a little sleep and I'll be ready to keep going.*

Then, in a little more than 12 hours after a day of working, Mike Wheeler will take the magnificent El Hopper out on their first 'official' date, the first of many yet to come, the first of the rest of their lives.

And it's going to be glorious.

Only, it won't be.

Not when Mike wakes up feeling like death warmed over.

It takes him a couple of moments to realize just how *awful* he feels. At first, he thinks it's just lingering exhaustion from the day before. But then he feels it. There's an ache in his bones, deep and piercing and so, so heavy, it envelops his whole being, making everything hurt. His head feels like someone's stuffed it full of dry cotton and when he breathes in, it's like glass scraping over his airways. It's worse when he breathes out, which triggers a spasming cough that rips through his throat and makes him feel like he wants to die.

Whimpering, Mike curls up in bed, hugging a pillow close to him, and tries not to cry out of sheer frustration, which is only made worse by how crappy he feels.

This isn't how today is supposed to go!

It's almost 10 in the morning, well past when Mike was hoping to wake up at, and he feels like absolute shit. Which mean all of his plans for today - working on the screenplay and *especially* his date with El - are all cancelled.

So, yeah, no wonder Mike indulges in a moment of self-pity. Because

he's been sick enough times to know that this is at least a 24 hour thing, where if he wants to have any chance of making it to work tomorrow morning, he's going to have to spend all day in bed.

He might, *might* be able to get in a bit of writing; he can do that from his bed, at any rate. At best, it's not going to be a lot, which will be better than *nothing* if he can manage it.

But taking El out to dinner? That's out of the question, absolutely and completely.

"I need to call her," Mike mutters to himself and cringes when he hears the way his voice sounds, all raspy and phlegmy and wrecked. It's the voice of a 60 year old smoker and it sounds *disgusting*.

God, if she hears him like this, she's going to run the other way as fast as she can. Hell, *he* wants to run away as fast as he can, he sounds that awful.

Maybe he'll make himself some tea or something first to soothe his throat before he tries calling her.

It takes way too much energy to push himself from bed and the way he shivers when the cooler air of his bedroom hits his bare chest makes him shudder in horror. *Great, a low grade fever. Just what I need.*

He digs through his clothes to find something to keep him warm and settles on an off-white thermal Henley, the fabric thick with sleeves that go all the way down to his wrists. It's comfortable and warm, but he can still unbutton it a little if he gets too warm (which, knowing him, will definitely happen). For the moment, though, warm is nice and, sufficiently covered, Mike slowly heads downstairs.

His legs feel weak, making him feel like a newborn foal or something, all shaky and wobbly, and he has to keep a hand on the bannister as he heads downstairs so he doesn't fall.

Mike makes it to the kitchen, *finally*, and sets about making tea. He quickly takes stock of what food he has while he waits for the water to boil, but nothing sounds good and his stomach turns a bit at the

thought of eating. *Ok, no appetite. Another bad sign.*

By the time Mike's finished making tea (something herbal Nancy left over when she came to visit, with a healthy dollop of honey and lemon), his spirits are so low, they might as well be in the 9th Circle of Hell. Because he feels awful, he has no appetite, he's pretty sure there's no cold medicine at all in the house, he still feels the pressure of needing to get this screenplay done and he really, *really* doesn't want to have to call first El and then the restaurant to cancel.

All in all, this is a really shitty day and there's *nothing* he can do about it.

And Mike Wheeler is not just someone who can sit around and do nothing. He's a fixer, a caregiver, the first person who leaps in feet first with his sleeves rolled up to solve a problem. Sitting around waiting for something to resolve itself is not how Mike operates. Not in the slightest.

He's just going to have to accept it, though. What else can he do?

So, settling back into bed, Mike takes a few sips of his tea, groaning roughly as the liquid passes through his sore throat, before reaching for his phone to call El.

The entire time, though, his heart is sinking, feeling like he's about to let her down.

(He knows it's irrational, but he feels like this is all his fault, like there was something he could have done to stop it. But sometimes people just get sick and he can't always control everything.)

Mike calls El with a couple taps of his phone and, as he waits for her to pick up, he tries to steel himself for this conversation, one he really doesn't want to have.

But there's no other choice and he hates how unfair this is.

Someday, one of these days, things are going to go Mike's way. They *have* to.

Guess it's too bad today's not that day.

When El sees Mike's name flash across her screen not long before lunch on Sunday, she takes a moment to tamp down the almost delirious giggles that begin bubbling up inside of her, making her feel light and effervescent.

One, it's because she knows in a few short hours, she's going to be going on a date. *With him.*

Everything's picked out - from the dress she's going to wear (sexy and elegant, making her feel pretty without being over the top), to the shoes she's pairing with it, to the jewelry and makeup and what underwear she's wearing beneath it and how she's going to do her hair... - El's *ready*. So ready she feels like she's going to explode.

But she's also happy to see Mike's name across her screen because she's barely talked to him since their conversation on Friday night and she misses him.

God, she misses him so badly, she can almost taste it.

She'd sent him a few encouraging text messages throughout the day, wanting him to know he had someone in his corner, cheering him on. El's proud - so, *so* proud - of Mike, of the opportunity he has. She knows he's earned it, knows he's talented enough to pull it off, and she can't wait to see what he's going to make of this moment, of this opportunity. She also knows that it's going to be *fantastic*, however it turns out. Anything else is just out of the question.

It's Mike. He can do *anything*.

So, she'd left him to it yesterday, wanting to give him the space to focus as much as possible.

Which, despite how much she'd missed him, was surprisingly easy to considering how El had her own plans for Saturday, plans which have left her a little sore on Sunday in ways she wasn't expecting.

Who knew tap and jazz dancing would make me hurt so much?

El thinks about her afternoon and evening, working with Robert's friend Kent (who's probably the gayest man she's ever met, including some of Will and Greg's friends, so even if Mike were the jealous type, he would absolutely have no reason to be. On a side note, she's glad Mike's not the jealous type; she's been there before with guys and it sucks not feeling trusted).

She met Kent at a dance studio closer to downtown, where he teaches when he's not performing. She'd explained to him why she needed to learn and what her dance background was, and then they launched straight into it, wasting no time before Kent was leading her through the basics.

It's only because of her lifelong experience as a dancer that she's not more sore than she is, but El's surprised at just *how* she's sore. There's a deep tension in her shoulders and elbows that's not normally there, as well as in her lower back, and it takes El a little bit to realize that it's because she had to work at keeping herself not as stiff while dancing. Tap and jazz is a lot more relaxed than ballet than she originally thought. Yes, there's fancy footwork and precise movements, but there's not the same austerity, the same formality. It goes against everything El's been taught and it's hard to turn off habits borne from years of dancing.

After they finished, El asked Kent if she could have a few more lessons over the next week or so, and that she'd pay him for his time. Kent had smiled, then, all perfect, white teeth framed by a tousle of deep, auburn hair, and pulled out his phone to check his calendar. El left the studio with three lessons booked over the next 6 days - Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday - and soreness from the past 4 hours already setting in.

Yeah, she's sore and a little tired, but just the thought of seeing Mike in a few hours is enough to make all of that seem inconsequential.

So, when El answers the phone, it's with all those thoughts and emotions swirling around in her head, and she's all smiles as she greets him. "Mike, hi!"

There's a beat, a heavy pause, before a thick sigh comes from the other end of the line. "Hi, El."

El hears it immediately - the thick, weary scratchiness in Mike's voice with a hint of congestion - and her heart goes out to him, worry immediately filling her. "Oh, Mike, you sound *horrible*," she says as she sinks down onto her couch. She knows, in this moment, that he's calling to cancel their date. He doesn't even have to say it (though she knows he's going to) and it breaks El's heart a little bit because she knows that a) he was really looking forward to it and b) she knows how much he hates having to do this for the second time in just a few days.

(Yes, she's disappointed - *really* disappointed, but it's so far down the list of immediate concerns, it's not even funny. Not with how horrible Mike sounds and how sad he probably is right now.)

Mike lets out a laugh that makes El cringe - *yikes, that sore throat*. "Yeah, you can probably guess why I'm calling," he says and El can so easily picture the way he's pouting right now. She can hear it in his voice and the way it resonates with her on a deep, instinctual level makes her want to go over to his place so she can give him a hug.

"Hey don't worry about it," El says, trying to soothe him over the phone as best she can. "You can't control these things."

"Wish I could," Mike says. "I feel guilty having to do this to you again."

His sadness eats at her like an itch she can't scratch, something she desperately wants to fix and make better. "No feeling guilty for getting sick. I want you to get better, Mike. There'll be other nights, other dates. But there's only one *you* and I'd like to keep it that way. I just want you to focus on getting better."

"Thanks for understanding," Mike says. "Still, I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for," El says. "So, how are you feeling? I know it can't be great just from the sound of your voice."

"I feel like shit," Mike says honestly, a harsh sigh escaping him. "Everything hurts, I think I'm running a fever, there's nothing here I want to eat, and I don't think I restocked on cold medicine from the

last time I was sick. And, even if I had any left over, that was so long ago, it'd be expired by now.”

El frowns. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s not,” Mike says. “God, and I have to keep working on this screenplay and I just want to sleep.”

The urgent need to help slams against the inside of her chest, clawing its way out and prompting El to speak before she’s even finished fully forming her thoughts. “Mike, what’s your address?” she asks, already making a list of the things she wants to grab.

There’s a pause, a split second of silence, before Mike speaks again, sounding confused. “Why?” he asks, slowly, as if he’s wary of her motives.

El smiles in spite of herself - god, he sounds so cute when he’s confused, even when he’s sick. “Just give me your address, you nerd,” she says, rolling her eyes

“Hey, you like me nerdy,” he grumbles, sounding sad and pouty, before he complies, El rushing to jot it down before she forgets with a piece of paper and a pen she luckily finds on her coffee table.

“Great,” she says, eager and excited to get on her way. “Go unlock your door and get back in bed. This won’t take long, I promise.”

“El, wait, what are you-”

“I’ll see you in a bit!”

El hangs up the phone before Mike can ask anymore questions and she’s up off the couch in a flash, quickly gathering a few things from her place before bundling up and heading out the door like a woman on a mission.

A self-assigned mission, El thinks with a giggle as she gets into her car. First stop: drugstore.

One stop at the drugstore later, followed by a quick detour to a nearby deli, El parks her car in front of Mike’s townhouse (which, she

can safely assume is his given the familiar Audi parked out front). It takes her a minute to gather her things - messenger bag slung over her shoulder, a couple of paper and plastic bags in one hand, keys in the other, purse somehow balanced in all this mess. She heads to the front door carefully, not wanting to slip on the sidewalk which is a little icy today - *that's the last thing she needs* - and she shoulders everything as best she can as she reaches for the doorknob.

El's really hoping that a) she got the address right, and b) the door's actually unlocked because she really doesn't feel like making a fool of herself today.

The door opens easily (*ok, halfway there*) and El peers inside slowly, taking a few hesitant steps over the threshold. She resists the urge to call out - Mike could be sleeping, after all - and she takes a long look around the place.

It's a nice townhouse, large open concept first floor with stairs leading up to where the bedrooms are, kitchen and dining room on one side, living/family room on the other. It's clean and neatly decorated, no hint of clutter, everything placed just so. El knows this is Mike's place just from this first glance. She can *feel* his influence over every inch of this place, like an aura that's settling around her.

And, if she wasn't sure, she would be absolutely certain once her gaze reaches the couch in the living room.

There, curled up under a thin blanket, is Mike, sleeping with his head propped up against the armrest, like he's *waiting* for her.

Because he is waiting for you, her brain whispers and El practically melts as she quietly closes the door behind her.

Heart feeling fuller than she can ever remember, El slowly sets her things down by the front door, taking a quick moment to set the food she brought over on the dining room table. She shucks off her coat and scarf, hanging them on the back of a chair, and toes off her shoes. She pads across the open space in her sock-clad feet, dressed simply in jeans and a warm, cashmere sweater, and stops in front of the couch so she can kneel on the floor.

The area rug is plush beneath her knees, cushioning her from the hardwood floor, but even if she had to kneel down on concrete, she wouldn't care. Not when Mike is in front of her, face mostly relaxed in sleep. He's a little too pale, with a sharp flush across his cheeks that speaks to the fever he's probably running, but he's still so very beautiful - just devastatingly handsome, all strong jaw and full lips and adorably mussed hair.

El's reaching for him before she's even aware of what she's doing, her hand gently coming down onto his cheek, his skin warm against the coolness of her palm. The roughness of his stubble rasps against the pads of her fingers, evidence that it's been a couple of days since he's shaved-

(and she tries very hard not to think about feeling the roughness of that stubble on other parts of her skin, but she fails miserably and shivers with what she can only describe is anticipation.)

-and El slowly slides her hand up so she can brush his hair away from where it's fallen over his forehead. His skin is smooth beneath her touch, but it's too warm and El frowns at the way Mike shivers.

But then his face scrunches up as he slowly wakes up and El finds herself smiling at just how cute the look on his face is before he opens his eyes. He blinks blearily, almost confused, and turns his head so he can look at her. "El?" he rasps, sounding so weary that El's heart practically implodes. Clearly he forgot she was coming over.

"Hey, sleepyhead," El says, softly, shifting so she can perch on the edge of the couch, her hip pressed against his ribcage. "How are you feeling?"

Mike frowns, ignoring the question, and shifts to try and sit up. He's having a hard time doing so and El slips a hand under his arm so she can support him. "What are you doing here?" he asks, sounding legitimately confused, once he's mostly upright.

El frowns back, more worried than confused, before she shakes her head and breathes out a small laugh. "I'm here to take care of you, silly," she says. The fact that he has to ask sets warning bells ringing

in the back of her mind.

“Why?”

The one word question, spoken in just above a whisper, tugs at El’s heartstrings. God, how long has it been since anyone’s taken care of him? How long as he been fending for himself?

El finds herself struggling to blink back tears, but she manages as she smiles up at him. “Because I care about you, Mike, and I want to help you feel better.”

“Oh,” is all Mike can say for a moment, silence stretched between them for a couple of seconds. “You’re not worried about getting sick?”

El lets out a light giggle. “I’m pretty hardy,” she says. “So I’m not worried and I don’t want you to be, either. I want you to focus on getting better. Let me take care of the rest.”

Mike stares at her for a good long moment, like he can’t believe she’s real, before he glances down at his lap, where the blanket has pooled after falling away once he sat up. He takes in a deep breath, sounding almost overwhelmed, before he looks back at her. “Thank you,” he says, like he’s not used to being able to do so.

El shifts once more, pulling her knee beneath her so she can lean over and press a kiss against Mike’s forehead. He sighs and she can feel the puff of air tickling the skin of her neck. She almost sighs at his closeness and she wants to pull him towards her just to hold him, not even caring that he’s sick. “Any time,” she says after she pulls back. She stands up and holds out her hands. “C’mon, let’s get you into bed.”

Mike lets out a whining groan as he takes her hands and lets her help him to his feet. “This is so not the reason I wanted you to be saying that,” he says, shoulders slumping as he steps over the blanket that’s fallen to his feet.

El doesn’t bother to grab the blanket - she’ll come back down and tidy up in a little bit - but she still smiles up at him, feeling cheeky.

“You want me to take advantage of you in your fragile state?”

Mike snorts as they make their way towards the stairs, Mike guiding her. “Don’t you dare. I want to be an active participant and fully enjoy it, thank you very much.”

El giggles. “Control freak.”

“Oh, ha, ha,” Mike grumbles as El slides his arm over her shoulder, supporting him while they go upstairs.

El’s still laughing a little as she follows Mike into his room and she can’t help but take a look around as she leads him towards his bed, half of her attention focused on helping Mike lie down so he can get some rest.

Just like downstairs, Mike’s room is neat and uncluttered, decorated in the homey shades of his chestnut furniture and dark blue blankets. The blinds are half open, letting the cool, midday winter sun filter into the room, casting soft shadows across all the surfaces. There’s a few decorative prints on the walls, but no personal pictures, not even of family (El almost rolls her eyes at that - what a typical guy he can be sometimes), but they’re not overwhelming and they accent the room nicely. Mike either has a good eye or he’s friends with an artist or interior designer or something.

Overall, it’s a nice room, *really* nice, one El hopes to spend a lot of time in (though hopefully under better, non-illness related circumstances).

Mike guides her to the right side of his bed, if she’s looking at it, and she lets his arm slide from her shoulders as he sits down heavily. “Thanks for the assist,” he says, sounding way too tired.

“Anytime,” El says with another kiss to his forehead, heart singing at how he leans in to her touch. “Now, you get under the covers. I’m gonna go downstairs and grab some things, put away some food, and get lunch together. You feel up to eating some chicken soup? Even just a little?”

Mike shrugs. “I’ll try.” He smiles, going for flirty, but just managing

to achieve adorable. “Just because you’re asking, though.”

El laughs, heart feeling too full. “Ok there, Romeo. I’ll be back in a little bit.” She eyes the flat screen TV. “Do you have, like, Netflix or Hulu in here?”

Mike nods, but a second later, he eyes her curiously, hesitant hope shadowing his gaze. “You’re...staying?”

“Until I feel like leaving,” El says, quiet, but bright. *Forever, if I can.* “That ok with you?”

“Yeah, of course,” Mike blurts out, all fervent eagerness despite how he must be feeling. He blushes, seeming to realize just how forceful that came across (though El doesn’t mind; she loves knowing how much Mike wants to be around her). “I mean, if you have time. I don’t want to interrupt anything.”

El shrugs, giggling. “Well, all of my plans for today revolved around getting ready for our date, so I find myself with nothing to do but play nursemaid all day,” she says, winking playfully.

Mike returns her humor with a flat stare that barely hides his own amusement. “You’re an evil tease, is what you are,” he groans.

“Get used to it,” El says as she gives him a gentle push, hand braced on his shoulder. “Right, under the blankets with you. I’ll be back in a minute. Just have your WiFi info ready when I get back, is all I ask of you.”

“I think I can manage that,” Mike says. “And, um, if you could grab my laptop from my office, just in the other room up here, I’d, um, really appreciate that.”

He asks so hesitantly, like he’s preparing himself to get shot down, that El almost reaches out and wraps her arms around him to hold him close. “You wanna work on your screenplay?”

Mike shrugs and looks down, sheepish. “I want it nearby if I have the energy, yeah.”

“Ok, I can do that,” El says. “Just as long as you don’t overdo it

today, ok?"

Mike rolls his eyes, almost exasperated - *and here's the sore patient.*
"Yes, Mom."

"Very funny." One more kiss on the forehead. "I'll be back in a bit."

El heads back downstairs to straighten up a bit and put things away. She rifles through kitchen cabinets and drawers to find plates and silverware, serving Mike some soup in a bowl and plating the sandwich she brought for herself, making them both some fresh tea.

It takes her a few trips to get everything upstairs - the food, the tea, some water, her things - and, after one last trip to grab Mike's laptop from the office in the next room -

(and *there's* all the nerd stuff, contained in one room, like a singularity of nerdom...though, El has to admit, some of the stuff is pretty, *really* cool)

- she enters Mike's room with the intent to stay put for a good long while. It's on her way back to the bed when she looks over at the TV and notices that it's on, logged into Netflix's homepage.

Smiling, El looks over at Mike, who's lying in bed, blankets pulled up nearly to his shoulders. "You cued up Netflix for me? What a gentleman."

Mike gives her a fond, if sleepy smile. "Anything for you," he says, sounding like he 100% means it, sore throat and all, and El's heart just *melts*. God, he's sweetest man she's ever met, even when he's sick.

"Thank you," she says, meaning it just as much, as she crosses his room and sits down near his knees, handing over his laptop. "For you."

Mike takes it and sets it off to his other side by his hip, eyes half-lidded and exhausted. "Thanks," he says. "Probably won't use it, but just in case...."

"I get it," El says. "Now, you think you can eat something before

taking some cold medicine?”

Mike pulls a face. “Is it the sleepy kind?”

El snorts. “I think, given how I think you’re feeling, *all* medicine is the sleepy kind. But I got both kinds, so I’ll give you the daytime version for the moment.”

““K,” is what he breathes out. “Pass the soup, then.”

El grabs their food from where she’s put it down on the dresser and she does indeed pass his soup over to him on a small tray she found in his kitchen before settling in with her sandwich on a plate, legs folded in front of her to serve as a table. “Let me know how it is.”

Mike gives her a look, eyebrows rising into his hair. “Did you make it?”

El shakes her head. “No, didn’t have time to. Picked it up from a deli I like nearby,” she says before she takes a bite of her sandwich.

Mike gives her sandwich a look. “You gonna get crumbs in my bed?”

“Not if you eat some of your soup, I won’t,” El says, winking playfully. Mike huffs out a laugh, but he eats some of his soup.

For a little bit, there’s no talking as they both eat, Mike letting out a pitiful groan every once in a while as the food passes through his sore throat, and El fishing through the plastic bag she got at the drugstore for the daytime cold medicine and the cough drops, setting aside a dose of each in between bites.

“You know,” Mike says after he pushes his soup aside (El notices that he only took a handful of bites, but it’s better than nothing and she’ll take what she can get). “This isn’t the kind of meal I had in mind when I imagined us eating together today.”

El looks over at him while she slides the tray away, setting it by the foot of the bed next to his feet. He’s reclining against the pillows, practically slumped against the headboard, arms lying loosely by his side like he lost the energy to figure out what to do with them. She smiles, soft and sympathetic. “Yeah, I know. Me, neither.” She sets

her plate aside and scoots up the bed, sitting so she's right next to him, her folded legs pressed against his hip. "Here, hold out your hand," she says, and when he does so, she drops the pills in his palm before she leans over to grab the water glass from off his nightstand, body hovering over his as she reaches across.

Mike groans. "El, you're killing me, here," he says.

El sits back down and eyes the cold meds, waiting until he pops them into his mouth before handing him the glass. "Sorry, didn't know my closeness was such a distraction," she says, grinning.

Mike swallows the pills, cringing with pain. He takes a couple more sips of water before setting the glass down by his tea. "You're the best kind of distraction," he says and there's a smile on his face, though sleepy, that is so adorably dopey, El almost leans over and kisses him *despite* how sick he is. "It's just...." He trails off, sighing roughly, almost petulantly.

El arches a curious eyebrow. "Just what?"

"You're in bed. *With me.* And I'm like... *this,*" he says, gesturing at himself with a weak hand, wrist flopping before he drops his hand back down to the bed.

"And that's why you need to rest up," El says. "So the next time I'm here, you *won't* be like this."

Mike's lips curl up in a small grin. His eyes are drooping and he's losing the battle against sleep. El gives him only a few more minutes before he's *out*. "Promise?"

"Promise what?" El asks with a fond smile and a tilt of her head.

"Next time?" he repeats.

Giggling, El sits up on her knees, weight rolling her forward, and leans over to press a soft kiss to his temple, lingering for a long moment just to breathe him in, one hand cupping his face while her other holds onto his shoulder. "I promise," she says, her voice just above a whisper. "There's going to be *lots* of next times."

“Hmm, good,” Mike breathes as El pulls back. His eyes are shut now and El’s heart clenches a bit with overwhelming fondness. “I think ‘m gonna sleep,” he murmurs. His hand reaches by his hip for the TV remote, fumbling a bit by her knee for it. “Remote for TV.”

El holds back the giggles that threaten to escape - sleepy Mike apparently loses all of his normal eloquence and it’s just the cutest thing she’s ever seen - and she takes the remote from his hand. “Thank you, kind sir,” she says, keeping her voice quiet. “Any preference on what I watch?”

Mike makes a sleepy noise in the negative and, smiling, El sets the remote aside and cleans up a bit, moving the food back onto the dresser and toeing off her socks, before she settles back down, sitting against the headboard with her legs outstretched and crossed at the ankle.

She flips through the “What’s New” section on Netflix and somehow resists every urge to browse Mike’s queue, thinking that *some* things probably should be private for a little bit longer. Nothing in the “What’s New” section catches her eye and she’s just about to search for “The Walking Dead” to start the rewatch she’s been planning for a few weeks (she’s missed the past few seasons and is trying to catch up) when she feels something slide low across her waist, just above her hip.

El looks down and sees that Mike’s rolled over onto his side, his arm reaching out to encircle her waist while he buries his face against her arm. “I’m glad you here,” he mumbles, mostly asleep, the words half muffled by her sweater.

“Me, too,” El says, reaching across to card her fingers through his hair, fingernails scraping lightly against his scalp. Mike leans into her touch and she can see the faintest hint of a smile lifting the corner of his mouth as he settles in further. “Go to sleep, Mike.”

“You’ll be here?” he asks. The words ‘when I wake up’ go unsaid, but El hears them anyway.

“I’ll be here,” she says. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Mmm, good,” Mike says on the exhale of a sigh before he goes still, sleep overtaking him.

El watches him for a moment, so full of love for the man holding onto her, she almost can’t contain it all. She leans over as best she can and kisses the side of his head, his hair soft beneath her lips, before she turn her attention back to the TV.

For a little while, El loses herself in the zombie apocalypse, attention focused mainly on the screen in front of her. But, every so often, El glances down at Mike, asleep and firmly snuggled up against her side, and she loses what feels like hours (but is maybe only half a minute, at most) just *staring* at him. His mouth parted just so, face relaxed, skin lightly flushed with sleep (and a mild fever, but El chooses to ignore that), he looks... *peaceful* is the only word El can think of. She could stare at him for hours, she thinks, entranced by the sweep of his cheekbones or the way his eyelashes fan out against his skin or how the splash of freckles across his skin reminds her of the sparkling patterns made by sunlight glinting off rippling water.

God, she loves him. It’s a truth she knows as surely as she knows the beat of her own heart, like it’s a part of her she’s been waiting her entire life to discover. She’s not quite ready to say it, not yet, but she knows, just knows, that when she is, he’ll say it back...if he doesn’t say it *first*. And the thought of hearing those words from his lips just makes her want to dissolve into a puddle of sheer happiness.

This is how El passes the hours of the afternoon and she finds herself slowly curling up against Mike in return - knees drawn up, body rotated so she can curl her legs up against the curve of his torso, one arm stretched over his head so she can cradle his head in the space between her arm and her torso. There’s a mild crick in her neck from having to twist her head to keep an eye on the TV, but it’s totally worth it to be so close to Mike, to feel the warmth radiating from him.

She never wants to leave.

It’s around 5 in the afternoon when Mike stirs outside of the normal movements of sleep. He lets out a groan and El pauses the episode she’s watching so she can focus on him. The arm around her waist

tightens, his fingers digging into the fabric of her sweater, and he tries to burrow into her side, his forehead pressing against her ribcage just beneath her left breast.

El reaches down and slips her fingers into his hair, gently massaging his scalp. She frowns a bit at the clammy heat radiating from him, the roots of his hair just sweaty enough that it concerns her. “Hey,” she all but whispers, mindful that he’s still waking up. “How’re you feeling?”

Mike lets out another groan. “Like shit,” he mumbles, voice still hoarse, squirming a bit as he tries to get comfortable. But he goes still a second later. “El?”

“Mm-hmm,” she breathes. “I’m still here.”

Mike moves his head and she leans back just enough so she can look him in the eye. Mike opens his eyes and blinks blearily up at her. “You’re still here,” he sighs before his eyes shut again, face contorting in a grimace.

“You ok? Tell me what’s going on,” El says, voice still just as soft, as she bends to press her lips against his hair.

“Hot and sore,” Mike says. “I feel gross.”

El’s still carding her fingers through his hair and she deepens the scalp massage. Mike rewards her with a breathed sigh of relief that trails off in a faint whimper and she can feel him relax a little under her touch. “You’re all clammy,” El says. “Why don’t you go take a shower? That helps me when I’m sick. And while you’re there, I’ll make you some fresh tea, heat up some more soup. Sound ok?”

Mike nods, but he holds her even tighter. “In a sec,” he murmurs. “Wanna hold you.”

Heart fluttering almost traitorously, El smiles as she rearranges herself, sliding down the bed a bit so Mike can hide his face against her neck and shoulder, his arms wrapped tight around her with his legs curled up under hers. El can’t help but marvel at how well they fit together, even like this, snuggled up with her on top of the covers

and him underneath.

“You feel good,” Mike breathes. “S nice.”

El bites the inside of her cheek to keep from giggling - he’d probably be a little embarrassed at the admission if he was fully with it (*or would he?* El wonders) - but she does hold him tighter and press her cheek against his hair. “It is nice,” she agrees with a sigh.

El lets them stay there for a little bit longer before she nudges Mike’s knee with her toe. “Alright, lazy, go shower and then you can come back and snuggle.”

“Ugh, *fine*,” Mike says, huffing a bit. Slowly, he pulls away, which gives El the opportunity to slide off the bed and come around to help him up. Once he’s up, a little unsteady on his feet, El watches as he grabs a clean set of clothes - different PJ pants and a grey t-shirt - before she gives him a gentle shove towards the door.

Once Mike’s ambled off to the bathroom and she hears the sounds of the shower running, El goes about the rest of her business, turning on a couple of lamps so she can see in the waning light of day. She gathers the dirty dishes and piles them as best she can on the tray before heading downstairs slowly, fumbling for light switches as she goes.

Her sandwich is mostly gone and she munches on the remains as she heats up more soup, boils more water for tea, and scrounges through Mike’s kitchen for something to eat. She manages to cobble together a small dinner of a sliced apple, some cheese that appears to be some kind of cheddar, a handful of crackers, and the rest of what’s left from the soup after she’s portioned out some for Mike.

Mike’s still in the shower by the time El’s back upstairs and she takes a moment to get settled: water glasses and mugs of tea on each nightstand, another dose of cold medicine on Mike’s side, her Kindle out of her bag in case she wants to read. She turns off most of the lights except for the lamp by the side of the bed she’s been sitting on, making the room look warm and homey.

It hits her, as she sits back down and arranges the pillows behind her

back, just how *domestic* this all feels - spending a quiet evening in, even if it's just her taking care of Mike while he's sick, snuggled up in bed, everything soft and quiet and so fucking calm. It's everything she's *ever* wanted and has never had with another man before and the intensity of how deeply it affects her almost steals her breath away.

And the feeling, somehow, only gets *more* intense when Mike walks back into his room. Her breath catches at the sight of him - hair wet, wearing a t-shirt that does *really* nice things to his shoulders, PJ pants slung low on his hips, looking *way* too tempting....

God, if he weren't sick, El knows she wouldn't be able to keep her hands to herself.

But then he sees her and he smiles, a multitude of emotions behind the expression: fondness, approval, surprise, awe, with a little bit of guilt and shyness thrown in for good measure.

El smiles back as she gets up to grab the food that's sitting on the dresser. "I warmed up some more soup for you," she says as Mike climbs back into bed, almost throwing himself down onto the mattress. "You hungry?"

"More than I was before, but still not much," Mike says as he watches her.

"Drink your tea," El says, gesturing to the mug with her chin as she sets down the tray and climbs in bed after it. "I hope you don't mind, but I scrounged through your kitchen to find something for myself."

Mike gives her a look as, per her instruction, he takes a sip of his tea. "Hey, you're welcome to whatever I have in this place," he says, all open sincerity. "I know it's not much. I was going to go grocery shopping sometime today, but...." He trails off in a shrug, looking at her sheepishly.

El lets out a quiet giggle. "It's ok, I made do - not too hungry myself after that huge sandwich."

They eat in relative silence, El watching to make sure that Mike actually *eats* something and takes another dose of cold medicine, and

once she's cleaned up after them, she climbs back onto the bed, this time slipping beneath the covers. The house is a little cool and, even though she's wearing jeans, El's never been the best at keeping herself warm. Plus, her feet are *freezing* and the warmth beneath the blankets - generated mostly by Mike who's something of a human furnace, she swears - feels so good, she never wants to leave.

El's barely settled in before Mike reaches for her again, resuming their earlier position with her sitting and him with an arm around her waist, burrowing into her side. The almost inaudible sigh of relief and happiness he lets out makes El giggle just a bit. "You're just a big cuddlebug, aren't you?" she asks, shifting just a bit to throw her arm around him, holding him close to her, arm folding up so her fingers can comb through his damp hair.

"I like holding you, so sue me," Mike says into her sweater.

"Oh, don't take that as me complaining," El says. "You're just so adorable, I had to say *something*."

"I'll take adorable," Mike says, sounding sleepy again. "Adorable's good."

"Adorable's *amazing*," El says. She glances at the TV and realizes that she doesn't feel like watching more about the zombie apocalypse right this moment, not when everything else around her is soft and cozy. With a quick press of the button, she turns off the TV and grabs her Kindle instead, where she's in the middle of a Neal Stephenson novel that she's been reading for what feels like weeks (*why do his books always have to be so long?*).

"No more TV?"

El grins and looks down. "Were you watching? If so, you gotta teach me how to watch TV while sleeping."

"Oh, hush," Mike says, poking her stomach lightly with his index finger. "Just curious."

"Yeah," El says, "I'm done with TV for the night, I think. Just going to read for a while."

"Hmm, sounds good," Mike says, sleep pulling at him harder and more insistently.

"Go to sleep, Mike," El says. "It'll help you feel better."

"Ok," Mike all but breathes out. And then, for the second time that day, Mike falls asleep half wrapped around her, holding her close like she's the only thing that can make him feel better.

El watches him for a moment before she turns her focus towards her Kindle. She notices the time as she turns it on - just past 6 in the evening - and she wonders how much longer she's going to stay before she goes home.

Let's just play it by ear, she thinks after a second. She doesn't want to leave Mike, but she also needs to go home at some point, probably *before* she falls asleep.

But, that's a problem for a few hours from now. For the moment, El just enjoys the feel of Mike holding her while she reads.

It's a nice quiet evening, a perfect cocoon of warmth and serenity. El barely moves, only getting up a couple of times to use the bathroom or refill her water glass. Mike doesn't wake up at all and he immediately grabs onto her in his sleep when she comes back to bed, subconsciously pulled towards her, needing to hold her.

None of this makes El want to go home.

But, when the clock inches closer to 11PM, El knows she can't stay any longer.

So, despite how much she really doesn't want to do this, El sets her Kindle down and turns so she can look down at Mike. He's still sleeping, cheeks still flushed though not as much as earlier, and he looks so peaceful that El hates to have to wake him. But she can't just slip out without saying goodbye. Her heart clenches when she imagines Mike waking up, wondering where she is and not being able to find her, lost and confused....

No, it's better to do it this way, she knows - even though he needs as much sleep as he can possibly get.

Sighing, El places a hand on Mike's arm and gives him a gentle shake. "Mike, wake up," she says softly.

A hoarse groan emerges from the back of his throat and El watches as Mike's eyes squeeze shut even tighter. He takes in a sharp breath, consciousness seeping in. "What is it?" he says after a moment, only half awake, eyes opening a fraction.

El can't help the way she smiles - he's too cute all sleepy like this. "It's late. I should probably get home."

Mike's breath hitches as sleep fades just enough for him to register her words. He looks up at her, panic filling his eyes through the exhaustion, and El's heart beats painfully in her chest. "No, don't go," he says, holding her tighter, fingers curling into her sweater. "Stay, please."

El looks down at him, feeling frozen to the spot under the pleading gaze he's giving her. God, he's *begging* her to stay and her breath catches in her throat, forcing her to swallow roughly as emotions swells inside of her. How could she possibly say no?

So, El sighs and lets a fond smile pull at her lips. "Ok, I'll stay," she says, hushed like if she speaks too loud, it'll break the spell that surrounds them. "Just let me clean up a bit, get ready for bed, ok?"

Mike stares at her, like he's trying to gauge the truth of her words, before he nods. "Ok," he says, body relaxing, eyes slipping shut. It's like, once he's sure she's not going anywhere, he doesn't need to expend the energy into staying up any longer.

El stares at Mike for a moment longer, wondrously amused at just how easily she gave in to his request, before she gently extracts herself from his embrace. She sets her Kindle on the nightstand and grabs her phone from her purse to set an alarm for 6 in the morning. That *should* give her enough time to get back home and get ready for the first day of school after winter break.

(She also wonders if Mike's going to feel well enough in the morning to be able to make it into work, but she shrugs the thought off a second later - that's a problem for tomorrow.)

El then dedicates herself to the task of finding something to wear to bed. Because, if she's going to stay, she's not sleeping in her jeans and sweater. No, she's spent too many hours on the road or in a plane, trying to sleep in her day clothes, to ever want to sleep in her jeans if she can at all avoid it.

Padding softly over to Mike's dresser, she digs through it gingerly for something to wear, feeling like she's being a horrible snoop the entire time. Luckily, the second drawer she opens is a drawer full of t-shirts and she gasps when she spots a familiar one: the worn, navy blue t-shirt he was wearing when she ran into him at the Windy Cafe for the first time.

El reaches for the shirt, marveling at the softness of the fabric beneath her fingers, and she pulls it from the drawer, knowing that *this* is what she's going to wear to sleep, no need to look any further.

She changes in the bathroom, folding her sweater and jeans neatly, her bra tucked safely between the items, leaving her in only Mike's shirt and her underwear. Though, Mike's shirt comes down to the middle of her thigh (*jeez, he's so goddamn tall*) so it's like she's wearing a dress or a nightgown or something and it helps to keep her from feeling overly exposed.

El doesn't have any toiletries with her, but she does use some of the mouthwash she sees on the counter, reckoning it's better than *nothing*. She runs her fingers through her hair, wishing she had a brush with her, before flipping off the lights and heading back to Mike's room, her folded clothes in hand.

Mike hasn't moved in the time she's been gone and El smiles at the sight that tugs so poignantly at her heartstrings.

And then, heart pounding, almost overwhelmed by what's about to happen, even though it's just sleeping (*just sleeping*, she has to repeat to herself), El turns off the lights and slides into bed.

Only, this time, when Mike reaches for her, El reaches back, her arm snaking around his waist while her other folds to rest beneath her head.

Mike's fast asleep and, once El's eyes have adjusted to the dark, she drinks in the sight of him, just barely illuminated by the distant light of a streetlamp coming in from the half shaded window.

In the light of day, Mike's face is strong, yet gentle, animated and open. In the near dark, though, there's something mysterious about the lines of his face, the cut of his jaw, that sets her heart beating fast in her chest, like she's seeing the part of him that he keeps hidden, locked away.

She *desperately* wants to unlock it, whatever it is. There's an intensity that's hinted at by his shadowed features that whispers promises of passionate nights and soul-searing kisses and, *god*, she wants that. She wants *him*.

But that'll have to wait for another day, when he's feeling better. When they have time.

God, now that she's lying down, though, it's hitting her just how tired she is.

So, as much as she wishes she could keep staring at Mike for all eternity, El lets her eyes close. She lets the feel of Mike's arm around her waist and the sound of his breathing lull her to sleep, warm and safe and *content*.

And she's never, *ever* slept better.

Those first few seconds of consciousness are always a little hazy.

But, despite the sleep that still clings to his mind, Mike's aware of three things. The first, which is what woke him up, is that he *really* needs to pee. Second, that he feels almost 100% better than he did yesterday, that all the achiness and head stuffiness is gone. And lastly, which is perhaps the most confusing thing, that he's holding onto something warm.

No, not something.

Someone. All soft breathing and equally soft skin, accompanied by the oh so familiar scent of light citrus.

El.

And, just like that, any lingering sleepiness is *gone*. Mike's eyes fly open, breath catching in his throat, needing to confirm what the rest of his senses are telling him.

She's here.

For a moment, Mike can't breathe. It's dark outside still, but there's enough light filtering in from the streetlights, diffuse and pale yellow, that he can make her out clearly.

And she's *beautiful*. Just breathtaking and adorable and gorgeous - dynamically attractive, the embodiment of everything from *cute* to *spectacular*, El is everything he's ever wanted. And that's just her physical appearance. That's not counting in her amazing, sparkling personality - how warm and sweet she is, how she makes him laugh, how she's one of the smartest, most talented people he's ever met. He's so in love with her, it feels like he's too small to contain the entirety of the emotion.

But, what's hitting Mike most of all, right in this moment, is that El stayed. He asked and *she stayed*.

What did he do to deserve her?

Mike tries to memorize everything about this moment - the heat of her beneath his palm and forearm from where his arm is snaked around her waist; the feel of the thin fabric of the shirt she's wearing (which he *swears* is his t-shirt and the thought that she might be wearing his clothes, with probably not much underneath, makes him dizzy in the best way possible); the softness of her face in sleep, all relaxed and trusting; the luxurious cloud of her hair, falling about her shoulders in loose waves; the feel of her legs tangled gently with his.

He wants to live in this moment forever, wants to do *nothing* but be here with her for all eternity.

But he still has to pee. *Badly.*

With a frustrated sigh, Mike removes his hand from El's waist and reaches up to brush her hair away from her face, smiling at the way her face twitches, accompanied by a sleepy whimper. "Don't move," he says, *whispers*, before he leans in press a soft kiss to her forehead.

Mike's a little stiff as he gets out of bed, joints filled with the last bit of lingering soreness from whatever illness he had, and he lets out a light groan that is only partly born from the aches in his bones. The other part is that he just doesn't want to be away from El, not even for a second. And it's a feeling that only gets worse by the day. He just always wants her near him.

He loves her.

Mike all but runs to the bathroom, taking care of business as fast as he can before he rushes back to his room. And when he slides back into bed, it's like his whole body sighs with relief, every inch of him filling with the sweetest sense of belonging. It's the most addicting feeling in the world.

El's exactly where he left her - hasn't even moved an inch - and Mike slowly pulls her back into his arms, unable to keep from touching her. With one arm tucked gently between her and the bed, hand resting on the curve of her ribcage, Mike lets his other hand trail slowly up and down her spine, his touch light through the cotton under his fingertips.

El shifts beneath his touch, letting out a soft, sleepy sigh, lips curling up in the beginnings of a smile. Mike decides that he never wants to stop touching her like this, if this is how she responds.

He grows a little bolder - not much, but enough to discover that the hem of the shirt she's wearing has ridden up to sit snugly against the small of her back, exposing the thinnest sliver of skin. Mike can't help it as he traces a finger along that exposed stretch of skin, feeling just a hint of the elastic of her underwear against the tip of his finger, his heart leaping into his throat.

It hits him, the full weight of the moment, the reality of what's going on. El's in his bed, wearing a t-shirt (probably his, *holy shit*), her underwear...

And absolutely nothing else.

Mike swallows roughly, feeling a little short of breath, heart pounding with anticipation and excitement.

And then El lets out a noise that is part moan and part whimper, sucking in a deep breath, and Mike knows: she's waking up.

Mike watches, rapt with attention, as El slowly opens her eyes, blinking rapidly a couple of times as wakefulness seeps in. She focuses, looking at him, and Mike's fascinated with the way El wakes up, with the way awareness lights up her face, like the rising sun, getting brighter by the second.

She draws in a deep breath, a brilliant, *beautiful* smile blossoming on her face. "Mike," she says, quiet, voice husky with sleep.

Time slows, the universe ceasing to exist except for what's inside the walls of his bedroom, and Mike is bewitched. "Morning," he says, gaze dancing about her face, not wanting to miss a thing.

El lets out a soft hum, a sound that's so content, it sends shivers down Mike's spine. "What time is it?" she asks.

Neither of them have dared to speak above a whisper and Mike's not about to break the spell that's woven around them. "Early," he says, quiet. "It's still dark out."

El reaches for him then, pressing the palm of her hand against the center of his chest, the heat of her touch warm through his t-shirt. "How are you feeling?"

Mike's heart is racing so fast, he thinks it might explode, his skin tingling with every beat, all centered around where she's touching him. "Better," he says, lifting his hand from her back, fingers trembling as he traces the curve of her cheek, from temple to jaw. El sighs, eyes closing, and she leans into his touch. It spurs Mike on and he reverses course, hand sliding up so he can cup the side of her neck, thumb grazing the skin right beneath her ear. "You stayed."

El lets out a whimpering sigh - at his touch? - and opens her eyes, her fingers curling into his shirt where she's touching him. "I did. You

asked. Very persuasively, might I add.” She’s a little more awake now, lazy amusement dancing across her face.

Memory hits him, hazy, of him asking last night and he grins. “All I said was ‘please’,” Mike says, breathing out a laugh.

El smiles, coy, shifting closer to him just a little. “See? Persuasive.”

“That’s all it takes, huh? Saying please?”

They’ve been moving closer to each other - not that there was a lot of distance between them in the first place - and when El slides her hand up so she can lay her palm against the curve of his jaw, her face is only inches away. “I guess I’m easy like that,” she says, almost breathless, voice hushed like it’s all but impossible for her to speak any louder.

“Easy, huh?” Mike asks, letting his gaze drop down to El’s lips, curled up in what he can only describe as a flirtatious smile. “I think I beg to differ.”

“Hmm, do you have an argument to convince me otherwise?” El practically bats her eyelashes at him, the look on her face open and inviting and so very tempting.

The air between them is thick, now, with a slow, heavy tension, wrapped in the lingering vestiges of sleep, all intimate and thrilling.

Mike can’t take it anymore.

For a moment, he just stares at her, captivated by her beauty, stunned by her sheer presence - *lucky, how did he get so goddamn lucky?* - his blood racing through him, coursing with love and desire and a happiness so rich, so overwhelming, that he almost can’t breathe.

He kisses her, then, because the idea of *not* kissing her is just too much to bear. El sucks in a sharp breath and Mike chases the sound, a low groan building in the back of his throat, as he captures her mouth with his.

Kissing El is intoxicating. Her mouth is pliant, lips soft and inviting as

they mold to his, her head tilting to deepen the angle of the kiss. Mike's lost in the feel of her mouth on his, heart racing, blood pumping hot through his veins, and he feels light-headed, caught up in the sensations that course through him.

El moves, shifting the hand that's on his face so that she can wrap her arm around him, and pulls herself even closer so her body is flush against his. Her breasts gently press against his chest as they breathe deep, heaving breaths, separated only by the thin layers of their clothes, and, suddenly, everything feels way too hot. It makes him want to be even closer.

He wants to lose himself in her, wants to surround himself with everything she has to offer. *God*, he just wants her, however he can get her.

Wanting, *needing* more, Mike drags his hand from El's neck, touch ghosting over her shoulder and down her back. El squirms beneath his hand, back arching to press against him that much more. Mike kisses her harder, tongue tracing along the length of her lips, as his hand reaches her hip, only partially covered by the shirt she's wearing. He squeezes the flesh there, palm pressed against her, fingers splayed over as much of her as he can touch. Part of his hand is touching her through her shirt, another through the flimsy fabric of her underwear (*holy shit, there's not much to it, is there?*) , but the rest of his hand is touching nothing but soft, bare skin.

El shivers when he squeezes her hip, letting out a whimpering moan, and Mike wants to touch her *everywhere* if only she'll keep making that noise. With one last squeeze of her hip (for the moment, that is), Mike moves his hand again, letting his palm glide along the length of her thigh and *holy fucking shit*. Her skin is so soft and warm, sliding like silk beneath his touch, and the way her breath hitches makes him feel like he's won the lottery or something.

And then El slides her leg up, foot dragging against his calf and pulling at the fabric of his PJ pants, and hooks it around his hip. Her inner thigh is soft against his hip, the immediate, naked warmth of her skin pressing into him through the thin layer of flannel between them. El shifts against him, arching into him with a roll of her hips as her mouth opens beneath his, her heel digging into the back of his

thigh.

Mike lets out a desperate moan, fueled by the dual sensation of her leg wrapping around him, thigh nestled fucking perfectly against the hollow of his hip, and the gentle, seductive brush of her tongue against his, inviting him in, with all meanings of the phrase. He grips her thigh tightly, fingers digging into the firm muscle, holding her tight enough that he wouldn't be surprised to see imprints of his fingers left on her skin, and he drags his mouth from hers, temporarily abandoning the seductive promise of her lips to lead desperate, open-mouthed kisses up the line of her jaw to the length of her neck.

Moaning in earnest now, El tips her head back to give him access to the sensitive skin of her neck, body tilting back as her weight shifts. Mike follows, rolling them over so that she's half trapped beneath him, one of his legs wedged between her thighs, their bodies fitting together like they were made to.

Mike can't stop touching her, doesn't *want* to. The hand at her thigh moves back up, not even hesitating as he pushes up beneath the fabric of her shirt. The skin of her stomach jumps at his touch, El's breath releasing in a stuttering gasp, and he lets his hand keep sliding up, palm fully pressed against her as his hand curves up and around her ribcage to land high on her back, the broadside of his thumb brushing against the side of her breast as he moves past it.

Everything feels too hot, now. What was once warm, all soft and intimate, is now *blazing*, intense and thrilling, the air around them charged. His mouth dances across the skin of her neck and face while his hand traces a greedy path up and down her body, unable to stop touching her from the top of her spine down to the bottom of her thigh and back again, shirt rucked up to bunch beneath her breasts.

El arches against him, body pushing into his, leg tightening around him, thigh hitching just a little bit higher so that it's wrapped around his waist. He groans when she pulls him somehow closer until his weight settles firmly in the cradle of her thighs, the heat of her body setting him on fire. Her hands aren't still, either, running up and down his back, fingers dancing across the back of his neck, through his hair, as she gasps and moans against his ear, encouraging him

with every breathy sigh and desperate whimper. Her body moves ceaselessly beneath his with a slow, undulating rhythm that makes him lose all sense, all reason as he searches to match her movements, his body syncing up with the motions of hers in a way that makes him feel like she's the only person he's ever supposed to be with.

Mike's not sure how long they've spent like this, feverish and needy, unable to get enough of each other, hands roaming, bodies moving with delicious friction. It feels like they have all the time in the world, or that time has stopped entirely until they no longer want to be like this anymore, until they no longer want *each other*.

And yet, it still somehow comes as a surprise when he feels El's hands slip beneath his shirt, her touch branding him. "Off," she breathes as she moves her hands higher, pushing up the fabric of his shirt.

Gasping, Mike fishes out the arm that's wrapped beneath El's torso and reaches behind him to pull his shirt up and over his head. He tosses it aside, hands having to leave her body to do so, and he lets out a laughing moan as El's hands continue to move across his torso, her touch trailing up to his chest. "Jesus, El," he breathes.

El looks up at him and Mike wishes it was later in the day so he could see her in the sunlight, so he could see her *better*. But, even in the near dark, he can still see the way she's looking at him, all swollen lips and eager, needy eyes, looking like she wants to *claim* him. "Kiss me," she says. "Kiss me and don't stop." Her hands are still moving across his skin, fingers tracing a dancing path along the lines of his pecs, the ridges of his ribcage, erotic and thrilling and *please never stop*.

"Never," Mike whispers as he leans back in. "I'll never stop."

He kisses her again, mouth open and devouring. El returns the kiss with equal fervor, arms wrapping around him, fingernails scoring lightly against the skin of his back. Mike moans, body shifting against hers *hard*, pressed against her from shoulder to hip. His hand slides back up and under her shirt, seeking out the soft warmth of her breast, needing to feel her, having not touched her there at *all* since they started this.

He knows, just knows, that this is it. All of the plans he made to seduce her are ruined, but he doesn't care. Because *this* is perfect, spontaneous and natural, no nervous buildup or anxious waiting. Just the two of them, Mike and El, El and Mike, together like they're supposed to be-

-and then a shrill ringing pierces his ears, interrupting the moment, the real world crashing back down.

"Shit, *fuck*," El hisses out of frustration, breaking the kiss as she reaches out for the nightstand next to her, body twisting and stretching beneath his to fumble for her phone.

Filled with the same frustration, every inch of him buzzing with unfulfilled desire, Mike reaches for the light to help El find her phone, setting it on the dimmest setting just as El's hand grabs it. He lets his head collapse against her shoulder, her body still pressed against his, caught between his weight and the mattress. His breathing is harsh against the shirt she's wearing (which *is* his, he recognizes his favorite navy tee and can't help the small thrill that runs up his spine) and he lets out a disappointed groan.

"Sorry, I'm so sorry," El says, sounding breathless as she turns off the sound. "6AM alarm."

"It's ok," Mike says, even though there's part of him crying out with a plaintive *no, it's not*.

"First day of classes after break," El says, reminding him. "Didn't want to be late."

Mike bites back the words that spring to the tip of his tongue - *let's call in sick, stay here with me*. He wants so badly to do nothing but spend the whole day in bed with her, exploring and pleasing each other, discovering all there is to know about her body, letting her return the favor. But he can't, *they* can't. Not when they have work. "I know," is what he says instead.

"Although," El says leadingly, her voice full of the type of suggestion that has Mike lifting his head from her shoulder to look down at her.

El's even more beautiful in the lamplight, where Mike can see the flush of her cheeks or the way her lips glisten with evidence of their kisses, all red and swollen, and he wants to lean down and recapture those lips, to pick up where they left off. "Although, what?" Mike asks.

El grins, eyes sparkling with mischief. "I don't have to leave *right* away." She leans up, cheek brushing against his as she takes his earlobe in between her lips, teeth nibbling on the flesh. "Can finish what we started."

Mike snorts, even as his whole body trembles with desire. "It'd have to be fast and, I don't know about you, but I'm not willing to rush our first time."

"Oh, you dear, sweet man," El says, teasingly.

Before Mike can ask what El means by that, the world tilts beneath him rapidly, making him almost dizzy. A heartbeat later, he finds himself on his back, staring up at El who's straddling his waist, her weight bearing down on him with unbearable sweetness. "El?" he asks, gasping at the vision above him. Her hair is wild and tousled, falling down around her shoulders with seductive softness. The shirt she's wearing is bunched around her waist, revealing the skin of her thighs and the pale pink of her underwear (*he gulps at the sight. jesus, there's not much there with women's underwear, is there?*). He feels frozen in place, stunned by how beautiful, how sexy she is, even if she's not meaning to at all (though, he's pretty sure she's meaning it right in this moment, what with the way she's looking down at him).

"I never said anything about having sex," she says, mouth curling with a teasing, excited smile. "But there are *other things* we can do. Things that don't take nearly as long. I figure I have about 10 minutes before I need to leave, so...." As Mike watches, El grabs the shirt she's wearing, fingers wrapping around the hem, and slowly pulls it up and over her head, exposing her naked torso to him inch by incredible inch.

Mike gulps and he can't breathe. *Holy shit*, he can't breathe. Because El's straddling him, wearing only her underwear, which is the tiniest scrap of fabric he's ever seen, looking down at him with open

invitation. His hands go to her hips, holding her tight, fingers gripping at her in an attempt to steady himself. She's beautiful, *ethereal*, and though he's seen her mostly naked before, those times were over video chat when she was miles and miles away. Not when she was touching him, close enough so that it would be no effort at all for him to reach out and touch in return.

A delirious, lovesick smile crosses his face. "10 minutes, huh?" he asks, feeling breathless in the best way possible. His gaze rakes up and down her body, unable to look away, eager to drink everything in. He's never seen anyone more perfect in his entire life.

"You just going to stare at me for the next 10 minutes, or what?" El asks, voice breathy and sultry. "Or should I take matters into my own hands?" She punctuates her point with a slow, insistent roll of her hips, the palm of one hand pressing against the skin right beneath his sternum.

A flash of heat zips down his spine as he pictures her doing just that, *touching herself*, and the way her body moves against his makes him groan from deep in his chest. *God*, he would love to watch her do just that.

But not today. Not this time.

The teasing in El's voice inspires him and, holding her tight, Mike flips them back over so that he's hovering over her, both of them moaning when their bare chests come in contact. El looks up at him with wide eyes, pupils blown, skin flushed with desire. He grins, almost overwhelmed by just how *gorgeous* she is, by how much he wants this, wants *her*. "Challenge accepted," he breathes before he kisses her.

10 minutes.

He can do 10 minutes.

Turns out, he can't do 10 minutes.

Instead, 10 minutes somehow becomes 20, but Mike doesn't care as he stares up at his ceiling, desperately trying to catch his breath.

He doesn't think El does, either, for a variety of reasons. One of them being the soft, lingering kiss she presses against the hollow of his hip, her lips warm against the naked skin. And Mike can't help the moaning chuckle that escapes from his slightly chapped lips. His tongue flashes out to wet them and his heart skips a beat when he realizes *he can still taste her*. He smiles, satisfaction warming every inch of him.

El slides up his body, peppering his skin with small kisses that tickle as well as excite. "You look pleased," she says, teasing, as she reaches his face, lips caressing his jaw with a couple of suckling kisses.

"Gee, I wonder why?" Mike teases right back, looking up at her. Her hair falls around their faces, curtaining them off from the rest of the world. But Mike wants to see her face, so he lifts a hand to push her hair back on one side, the light spilling across her features once more. It's still dark outside, the pre-dawn nearly upon them, but the light of the lamp is still there and Mike smiles as he looks at her. Her skin is flushed, post-orgasmic glow suffusing her, and he thinks she's never looked more beautiful.

His hand moves down her shoulder, across the skin of her back, before settling on her naked hip. Mike glances down her body, drinking in the sight of her. She lost her underwear somewhere in the last 20 minutes (though, "lost" is something of a misnomer, seeing how the memory of removing it from her is seared into his mind), so now she's completely naked.

"See something you like?" El asks, smiling softly.

Mike looks back up at her face, grinning even wider. "I'm offended you even have to ask," he says.

"So sue me, I like validation," El says before she leans over and kisses him on the lips, her mouth hot on his despite the satisfaction that surrounds both of them.

God, her mouth.... Mike groans, fingers of his other hand coming up to slide into her hair, at the memory of just what that mouth can do...of what that mouth just *did* to him.

It only takes a few seconds, but he can feel the way desire starts to stir in his blood once more and he has to break the kiss before he just says *fuck it* to this whole going to work thing, even as he marvels at just how quickly his body responds to her. *Holy shit*, he's never going to stop wanting her, is he? "Your mouth is way too tempting," Mike says, voice husky, looking up at her to see her looking down at him with heavy-lidded eyes.

"Hmm, you weren't complaining about that a minute ago," El says, teasing amusement written across every inch of her face.

"Hey, if I ever complain about *that*, feel free to have me committed or something, because I *will* have gone crazy." Mike pauses, guilty gratitude edging out some of the satisfaction that courses through him. "You, um, didn't have to do that, though. Not that I didn't appreciate it, but...you know."

The smile on her face softens and El lets out a breathy giggle. "I know I didn't have to, but I wanted to." She pauses, smile turning sly. "Besides, I was just repaying the favor," she says, running a finger across his lower lip. "If I had known how talented your mouth was, we would have been doing this *months* ago."

Mike laughs, happy and buoyant. "Wait," he gets out through what he can only describe as giggles. "If I had gone up to you in September and been all 'hi, my name's Mike and I'm *really* good at oral sex', you would have believed me?"

El thinks about that for a second, lips pursed in a cute look of contemplation, before she giggles with him. "Ok, ok, fine. My overall point still stands, though."

Mike leans up and gives her a quick kiss. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

El lets out a delicate snort. "*That's* an understatement," she says before she sighs. "Right, I should probably get going. I'm going to be late enough for work as it is."

Mike can't help but pout as he watches El climb off of him, but he consoles himself with watching her move around his room naked. He still can't believe that he gets to see her like this, that he gets to touch her the way he just did, that she wants to touch him back, wants to give as good as she gets. He knows he's going to remember this morning for as long as he lives. Yes, they may not have had sex, but, god, it was everything but.

(his hands touching her everywhere, undeterred by the last bit of clothing she's wearing. his mouth following suit before he strips her completely naked. the sounds she makes as he makes love to her with his mouth and fingers. the way she falls apart, wholly and completely, body arching and shifting beneath his touch. her weight flipping him over as she returns the favor, kissing her way down his torso, fingers curling into the waist of his pants, tugging down the fabric to settle around his thighs. the heat of her mouth, the press of her fingers, his eyes squeezing shut at the feel of her, overwhelming in ways he's never experienced. crying out as she pushes him over the edge, free-falling into pure sensation.)

He smiles at the memory as he sits up, hips shifting so he can right his PJ pants, pulling them back up his legs to settle around his hips once more. Mike turns to keep watching El, who's moving around the room, searching. "What are you looking for?"

"Where you tossed my underwear," El says, glancing at him over her shoulder, one eyebrow arched with teasing chastisement.

Mike chuckles. "So, wait, if you never find your underwear, does this mean you'll stay naked in my room forever?"

"Nice try, Wheeler," El says, grinning.

Well, he had to try.

Still laughing, Mike looks around, not willing to stand, to see if he can find what she's looking for. And there, by his feet, is a flash of pink fabric. "Found them," Mike says as he leans over to grab them off the floor. He sits up and watches as El saunters over to him, hips swaying, and Mike's hypnotized.

He was going to tease her while holding onto her underwear, perhaps

bargaining for them - withholding them in exchange for a kiss - but his thoughts short circuit as she glides over to him, allowing her to pluck her underwear easily from his grasp. "Thank you," she says primly, grinning the entire time.

Mike watches as she slips them on and the sight of her partially, if barely, clothed temporarily clears the fog from his brain. He reaches for her, hands encircling her bare waist, pulling her towards him and lifting her onto his lap. El lets out a squealing giggle as her legs settle instinctually around his hips, her ankles crossing behind his back. "Mike!" she exclaims. "I need to go!"

"In a second," Mike says, looking up at her, smiling so wide it almost hurts. "I'll bring you breakfast, so you have a little more time."

El's arms wrap around his neck and Mike decides that nothing feels as good as holding her in his arms and feeling her wrapped around him. "You're a dangerous temptation, Mike Wheeler," she says, beaming at him.

"Good," Mike says. "If it'll make you stay forever, I'll take it." His hands are splayed across the skin of her back, soft and warm beneath his palms.

El shakes her head at him, exasperatedly amused. "What am I going to do with you?" she asks, giggling.

Mike waggles his eyebrows. "Oh, I can think of a few things," he says with a grin.

"Walked right into that one," El says with a roll of her eyes. She presses a sweet kiss to his lips, one that has his heart skipping a beat or two, before she pulls back. "I really do have to go, though."

Mike nods, sighing a bit. "I know. Wish you didn't."

"Me neither," El says. She moves to slide off his lap and Mike lets her, his fingers grazing lightly against the skin of her torso as she stands back up. He still watches her, though, as she picks up her folded clothes from the top of his dresser and puts them back on. Even fully clothed, she's still the most beautiful woman he's ever seen

and Mike will *never* not be in awe of her.

El grabs her things and, wordlessly, Mike gets to his feet so he can walk with her downstairs. He loves how there's no awkwardness between them, no weird adjustment period. She moves through his place like she's always belonged here, like she's *supposed* to be here. And the thought that he can have her here, that she can exist in all of his spaces, makes him feel short of breath, he's so excited.

Mike walks her to the door and he watches while she puts her shoes on before she looks up at him. "I'll see you in a little bit?"

Mike nods. "Yeah," he says, softly, not wanting her to go.

El reaches up, Mike bending over on instinct, so she can kiss him, lips soft and sweet against his. "Bye, Mike."

El turns, going for the doorknob, but Mike's hand flashes out, grabbing her by the wrist. "Wait," he says, tugging her so that she turns back towards him.

Her brow's furrowed, eyebrows knitting together in concern. "What?" she asks, voice quiet, but warm.

Mike smiles down at her, feeling a little bashful all of the sudden. "I just...thank you, for coming over, for taking care of me. For *staying*. I'm not used to this, having someone watch out for me, having someone just *be* here."

El smiles up at him, a little sadly, but she lifts her hands so she can cup his face, her fingers light against his cheeks. "Well, get used to it," she says. "Because I'm not going anywhere."

Never? he wants to ask. But he doesn't, not yet. It's too soon for that, even though Mike knows that day is coming sooner rather than later. So, instead, he breathes out a laugh, shaking his head almost incredulous. "Good to know," he says before he leans in one last time, hands going to her elbows as she lifts up onto her toes, their lips meeting in a deep, slow kiss. His heart thumps heavily in his chest, making him feel almost dizzy with emotion. It's a kiss heavy with promise, the promise of *everything* and *forever* and Mike never

wants to let go, wants to live always in the promise of her mouth on his.

And when the kiss ends and he looks down at her, the soft pre-dawn light filling the room, he knows she feels the same.

“Ok, now I *really* need to go,” El says through a breathy giggle.

Mike nods. “Alright. See you in a bit. Bye, El.”

El gives him one last kiss, a quick peck against his lips. “Bye, Mike.”

She slips out the front door, the cold morning air making him shiver as it hits his bare chest, and Mike closes the door behind her, feeling like half of his soul just walked away.

But, despite it all, despite how much he hates that she had to leave, Mike smiles.

Because El is *everything*.

And she’s *his*.

Just like he’s hers.

Notes for the Chapter:

Haha, well...*that* was fun, wasn't it?

clears throat

Ok, then, so...I'm not entirely sure when the next chapter is coming out, but I pretty much know everything that's going to be in it (still need to figure out what the chapter title is going to be...something will come to me, I know it.....). Also, I managed to write 34k words in, like, 10 days so....hopefully, not too long?

fingers crossed

9. Every Time We Touch

Notes for the Chapter:

So, yeah, this was supposed to go at the end of the last chapter. But, at 27k words, you can maybe kinda see why I didn't. Hell, I don't even know if AO3 will let me have chapters 50k+ words and I'm so embarrassed that I'm honestly having to think of that limitation that I don't even want to test it.

BUT, I FINISHED ANOTHER CHAPTER!! *throws confetti* I hope everyone enjoys!

There's a note taped to her door.

It's an innocuous thing - a small piece of white paper, folded in half so that it's about two inches square, stuck just above the doorknob with a postage stamp-sized strip of tape - but it sets her heart racing anyway, and she feels like she might cry as emotion swells inside of her, happiness and surprise and sheer adoration.

It's strange. In a morning full of the unexpected, all overwhelming in the *best* way possible, *this* is what finally gets her.

Because El knows, just *knows*, that the note is from Mike.

And she's so touched, she almost doesn't know what to do with herself. Hell, it doesn't even matter *what* the note says; just its existence is enough to make her want to hunt him down and kiss him until they're both gasping for breath.

Again.

It's been *quite* the morning, El thinks with a giddy smile, all lovesick excitement and blissful satisfaction. From waking up in Mike's arms, his hand warm where he'd been touching her through the fabric of the shirt she was wearing; to the steamy makeout session that soon followed, getting cut short by her alarm before they could get too carried away; to saying 'screw it' anyway, hands and mouths on each

other's skin, driving each other into the heights of overwhelming pleasure.

Sure, now El's late for work - though there's still a little more than 10 minutes before the first block of the day starts, it's still late for El who likes to get to her office a half an hour before the first bell rings - but it's 100% worth it today.

And not just because she knows, for a fact, the full range of ability possessed by Mike's talented mouth.

*(though, that is most definitely a bonus, she's **not** going to lie.)*

No, it's worth it because she's never felt so in sync with another human being in her entire life, has never felt so safe and so *wanted*, so cherished. Mike handles her with confident hands and worshipping lips, his touch sure without being assuming or taking advantage, and she feels so very special to be on the receiving end of that consideration, that *care*.

God, does he know how to make her feel good. And she thinks, hopes, she makes him feel just as good, the thought making her blush a bit at the memories from not even a couple of hours ago, her heart skipping a beat in her chest as she remembers.

(his hand touching her first through the fabric of his shirt then on her bare skin. his kisses trailing down her body, stripping her naked, before she loses herself in the heat of his mouth, the curl of his fingers, her hand clutching his hair as she falls. returning the favor once she's come down from her high, feeling powerful as she reduces him to breathy moans and desperate cries before she pushes him over the edge to follow her into pure bliss.)

At the very least, what happened this morning proves to El that she hasn't been imagining the sexual portion of their chemistry, that they're compatible there as well as in every other way. And El *can't wait* to fully test out that compatibility.

But, that's a different thought for a different day. And El still needs to investigate the note taped on her door.

El notices it when she's halfway to unlocking her door, keys poised in hand. She lowers her keys while she reaches for the note with her other hand, fingers trembling just a little as she plucks it from where it's been placed.

She unfolds the slip of paper and reads the short message, 5 simple words written in his crooked, looping script that make her breath catch in her throat and send her smile into overdrive: *I have something for you.*

The trembling in her limbs ratchets up a notch as she hurries to unlock her office door so she can throw her stuff down and take off her jacket. She may not have been able to wear the cute dress she wanted to wear today because it needed to be ironed (and she didn't have the time to iron), but she's wearing a pair of slacks with a *really* nice, fitted lavender silk blouse that makes her upper body look *fantastic* in a way she wants Mike to be able to see. And he won't be able to see if it she's still wearing her bulky winter coat.

So, with 10 minutes left until the first block of the day starts (and, since it's an odd week Monday, first up is the bi-weekly Advising Block, where all the teachers sit for about a half an hour with the 7-8 students they've been assigned to advise and mentor throughout their high school career), El practically *skips* down the halls as she makes her way to Mike's classroom, his note clutched firmly in her hand.

She slows a bit as she approaches Mike's classroom, taking a quick moment to run her fingers through her hair, fielding curious looks from a handful of students all the while, before she goes to stand in the doorway.

And her breath catches in her throat as her heartbeat skyrockets.

Oh. My.

There's a few of Mike's advisees in the room, sitting near each other in a small cluster of lab stools. But El's attention is focused on Mike, who's standing sorting through papers at his demonstration lab table. He's wearing a crisp, white fitted button down, no tie with the top couple of buttons undone, with equally fitted black slacks that hug close to his waist and hips. His hair is how El loves it, gently

disheveled, looking like he's run his hand through it one too many times and El itches to follow the trail blazed by Mike's fingers. God, she can practically feel the thick, silky locks sliding between her fingers and the memory of it is just not enough to sustain her.

He looks amazing.

Seriously, the only way Mike could look better would be if he were wearing a blazer to go with the outfit. As it is, El wants to drag him off to somewhere where they can be alone, where she can unbutton first that shirt and then those pants and *then* -

El's thoughts halt completely the second Mike looks up so that his gaze lands on her. Suddenly, her whole body comes to life with tingling warmth, the ghostly memories of how Mike touched her less than two hours ago setting fire to her skin and she swallows the gasp that builds in her throat. But, *god*, the way he's looking at her as his gaze trails up and down her body, the look in his eyes an addicting swirl of affection and awe and *want*, all wrapped up in a happiness that takes her breath away, is just... *wow*.

El knows she's looking at him in exactly the same way and, *Jesus Christ*, everyone's going to take one look at them and just *know* what they got up to that morning. It's written across every inch of their faces, lives in the way they're looking at each other and in the air that separates them, thick with tension barely resolved.

(What happened between them this morning gave her just a taste of what it would be like to be together and El wants more, wants *all of it*, in a way that threatens to override her common sense, that makes her think that she's never, *ever* going to get enough of him and that they're going to have to live with this simmering tension between them for the rest of their lives, tension that, no matter how often they resolve it, will just build back up again.

...Oh god, she's already thinking about the rest of their lives.)

El smiles, completely unable to contain it, and takes a few slow steps into the classroom, the heels of her boots clacking against the tile floor. She can feel the exaggerated sway of her hips, feeling powerful and sexy after their morning together. Smug satisfaction blossoms

inside of her when she sees Mike's gaze drop to watch the motion, his own lips pulling up in a smile when he looks back up at her face. "Good morning," she says, eyebrow arching flirtatiously.

Mike's smile grows wider. "It is a good morning." He pauses, one of his own eyebrows mirroring hers. "A *really* good morning." His voice dips with those last words, low and husky and *knowing*.

Good god, how are they supposed to contain this at work? How are they supposed to be in the same room together and *not* look, sound, *exist* like they *want* each other?

El's not sure, not sure at all. But, until they figure it out....

El moves closer to his lab table, watching as Mike moves so he's leaning against it, forearms propped against the surface, the look on his face curious and *hungry*. The move emphasizes the long, graceful lines of his torso, his shirt pulling taut against the width of his shoulders, the lean musculature of his biceps. His hands clasp lightly in front of him, long, graceful fingers loosely woven together, and El glances down at them, shivering as she remembers. *God, those fingers....*

El smiles like the cat who got the canary as she holds up the note, wrist rotated so she can show him the words written on the paper, knuckles pressed against her sternum. "So, *someone* left me this note on my office door."

Mike ducks his head, breathing out an amused laugh. He looks back up, tossing his hair out of his eyes, and El almost fucking loses it. "Must be quite a guy to leave you such a cryptic note."

"Mmm, yes, quite the tease he is, too. A girl might get her hopes up, with such an open-ended promise," El says, biting the inside of her lip to keep her smiling to merely wide instead of face-breaking.

Mike's laugh grows into a amused chuckle as he shakes his head. "Well, we wouldn't want *that*, now would we? A guy like this should be all about keeping his promises."

El can't help it: she giggles. "A guy like this should know that girls,

especially *this* one, love nothing more than the... *satisfaction* of a promise kept.”

Mike’s other eyebrow joins its twin. “Satisfaction, huh?” he asks, straightening to his full height. “Well then, this guy should follow through on his promise. Dissatisfaction is *such* an ugly thing, after all.” The grin on his face is so shit-eating, so *smug*, El itches to kiss it off his lips.

El stands in front of the lab table and slowly slides the note across to him with a dainty index finger. “Give up the goods, Wheeler.” God, how is this her voice, all breathy and teasing and *happy*? How is it that she feels so untethered and jubilant? How is it that Mike makes her feel like this with no effort at all?

And then Mike winks, fucking *winks* at her as he takes the paper out from under her hold, folding it easily in his fingers, before he gestures at her with it. “I know better than to keep a lady waiting. C’mom, it’s in my office.”

“Bold of you to assume I’m a lady,” El murmurs as she follows right behind him, snickering at the way he stumbles a bit.

“Watch it, Hopper,” Mike tosses over his shoulder as he regains his equilibrium, words equally as hushed.

Mike’s office is a long, narrow room that partly acts as storage for various physics and chemistry equipment, as well as some of the more dangerous chemicals, door off to one side with the rest of the space leading off to the left from it. The door is thick to prevent someone from easily breaking in, and El can’t help but think that it would also act as a great barrier to prevent sound from leaking out into the main classroom. Which means now she can’t stop thinking about how she would *love* to test and take advantage of those sound-proofing qualities.

Down girl, she tells herself, trying to keep a lid on the hormones that swirl madly in her veins.

Mike walks over to his desk, El hot on his heels, like she’s magnetically drawn to him. And when he reaches his desk, both of

them completely out of view, he whirls around, face lit up with intent. El watches as Mike spares half a second to check behind her shoulder before he pulls her towards him, one hand on her hip and the other sliding into her hair as he leans down. El meets him halfway and their lips meet in a kiss that sets her on fire, her own hand coming up to cradle his head, fingers tangling among the strands she wanted to touch so badly just moments ago.

It's a quick kiss - quick and hot, just *indecent*, all open mouths and caressing tongues, hands desperately clutching at one another as their bodies curve into each other. Every fiber of El's being sings with his closeness, heartbeat exploding in her chest like fireworks in the night sky. And it takes all of her fortitude to hold back the whimpering moan that builds in her throat, her blood boiling with desire that overtakes her so fast, it makes her dizzy.

El doesn't just want him, she *needs* him, needs him like she needs air, like he's crucial for her very survival. It's a need that's crawled under her skin, making everything tingle, her skin feeling tight and aching.

And, just as quick as the kiss starts, it ends, both of them breaking apart with a suddenness that makes her dizzy. They both take a partial step back, breathing hard with barely restrained desire. "Holy shit," Mike says, just above a whisper, sounding ragged and breathless like he did in bed earlier that morning.

El lets out a shaky sigh, almost whimpering, nodding in what she can only describe as commiseration. "I know," she says. She brings her hands to press the backs of them against her cheeks, her knuckles cool against her heated skin.

Mike runs a trembling hand almost frantically through his hair and the way he's looking at her, gaze dark and needy, makes her gasp, her teeth pulling in her lower lip to restrain herself from kissing him again. Only the move draws Mike's eyes down and he lets out a groan. "Ok, you're not allowed to bite your lip like that." He sounds just shy of manic - *overwhelmed* - and Mike reaches out, palm cupping her jaw, to run his thumb across her lips, pulling her lower lip from between her teeth

El lets out a quiet moan, eyes slipping shut as sparks light up along

her skin at his touch. Still, she cracks a small smile as she opens her eyes. “Why, too tempting?”

“Let’s just say it really makes me resent not having us both call in sick today,” Mike says.

A shudder runs through El’s body and she takes a brief moment to live in the feeling, stomach swooping like she’s just jumped off a cliff, before she tries to rein herself in. “So, is this what you had to give me?” she asks, her hand coming up so she can rest her palm on the back of Mike’s hand, still holding her cheek.

Mike laughs and pulls his hand from her skin, fingers trembling a bit, a tremble that El’s own hand echoes. “Actually, it’s *not*. I just couldn’t resist.”

“Well, don’t stop yourself on my account,” El says, grinning.

“If I don’t, I can’t be held accountable for my actions.”

El giggles. “Hmm, you make it sound like you find me irresistible.”

Mike gives her a dry look that helps cut through the naked desire between them. “Gee, you think?” he says as he turns around, reaching for something on his desk. And, when he turns around, he’s brandishing a medium-sized paper coffee cup and a brown pastry bag. “*This* is what I have for you,” he says, smiling proudly, all boyish and adorable and, god she loves him.

“Again?” El asks even as she’s reaching for the items, relieved. She had time to gulp down a partial mug of coffee at home as she got ready, but she wasn’t able to eat anything. She would have been fine - and, all things considered, giving up breakfast in exchange for what she *did* get this morning is a trade she would make over and over again - but she’s not going look a gift horse in the mouth, so to speak. Besides, she could really use more caffeine anyway.

“Well, I said I would buy you breakfast since I kept you longer than originally agreed upon,” Mike says, eyes flashing with heat with *why* she was late leaving his house that morning.

“Well, thank you, kind sir,” El says, heart fluttering dangerously in

her chest. “Walk me to my office? You have few minutes before Advising Block starts.”

“I would be honored to,” Mike says. El flashes him a smile and turns to leave, but she ends up shivering a second later as she feels Mike’s hand at the small of her back, gently leading her towards the door. El shoots him a warning look as they walk through his classroom, but the look El gets in return is way too innocent for its own good in a way that threatens to make her laugh.

When they’re out in the hallway, where there are way more students now that the first bell of the day is near to ringing, El peers into the pastry bag, curiosity tugging at her. “Whatcha get me?” she asks, tip of her tongue peeking out from the corner of her mouth.

“Not a regular croissant, unfortunately,” Mike says. “They were out when I got there. So I grabbed you a turnover. You *do* like apple, right?”

El beams up at him, heart feeling full to the point of bursting. “I *love* apple. Thank you, honestly.”

Mike glances down at her, soft and fond. “You’re welcome.”

El quickens her pace as she nears her office and she can feel Mike trailing behind her. She puts down the breakfast Mike brought her and turns to see him, looking down at her with amusement, eyes twinkling. “So, have you been sufficiently escorted?” he asks, grinning.

El almost guffaws at the audacity, the sheer cheek. *I’ll show him, smug bastard.* Arching an eyebrow in playful challenge, El moves towards him, her steps languid and swaying. She hears Mike’s breath hitch, excitement rippling in the sound, but right before she gets to him, she cuts around, her hand brushing along his stomach as she moves past him towards her door.

El risks a glance behind her, watching as Mike turns to watch *her*, eager and desperate through the curiosity. Not looking away, El reaches out and closes her office door behind her, leaning against the surface of it as it latches shut, her fingers quickly flicking the lock.

She moves back towards him with the same sway in her hips, almost slowly, like they both have all the time in the world. The tension between them nears its boiling point and it fills El with the sweetest heat. Her heart races, making her mouth feel dry, and she licks her lips to relieve the feeling.

God, she feels wanton and she knows she must look it, too. Not that Mike minds, she figures, given the way he's looking down at her, wide-eyed and wild, like he's barely holding himself back. El knows this to be true when she reaches for him, pressing her hand against his chest, right above his heart. His pulse races beneath his skin and a tremor that runs through him that's so fast, he's practically vibrating. The same tremor runs through her body, tightening every muscle and making it hard to draw in a full breath.

There's something that El wants to say, something teasing and coy, but it fades away as they stare at each other, lost to the ether for all time. She's moving before she knows it, stretching up on her toes while her hand slides up his chest to rest on his neck. Mike's skin is hot to the touch, searing into her palm, and she stretches her first two fingers to trail lightly along the edge of his jaw, his skin smooth beneath the back-and-forth passes of her fingertips. "You shaved," she whispers, breathlessly awed. Mike's hands fall to her hips, holding her in place, and El shivers. His hands are warm through the fabric of her slacks and she wishes she could make the layers of clothes between his touch and her skin disappear like magic.

The tiniest amount of amusement finds a way to cut through the spell that surrounds them and Mike's lips quirk up in a smile. But his eyes are locked on hers, gaze unbreaking, and El feels like she's drowning. "That's what you're choosing to focus on right now?" he asks, adopting her whisper.

El smiles and it feels faint with how just overwhelmed she is by all things *Mike*, but it's there and she watches as Mike's gaze flickers, dropping to her mouth for a brief moment at the motion of her lips. "Fair point," she says. "Consider this my apology, then." She pulls him towards her while she stretches up the rest of the way, tilting her head so she can capture his mouth with hers.

It's a deceptively simple kiss to start - quiet intakes of breath, the

slow shifting of hands to better hold each other (El's hands clasping behind his neck, Mike's sliding up to splay across her lower back), the gentle curvature of their bodies as they melt into one another - a kiss like the air around them isn't bubbling over with tension, needy and thick.

That all changes in the brief space between lips parting and meeting once more. A switch flips, the heat boils over, and El is consumed, Mike right along side of her. She loses all sense of time and space as their mouths meet over and over again in hungry, bruising kisses, hands clutching each other hard through their clothes, their breath escaping in hushed cries and whimpering moans. Mike's touch trails down her back, burning a path of fire across her skin, until his hands wrap around the back of her thighs. El takes the cue, hopping up into his arms, legs easily wrapping around his waist as his hips settle easily into the cradle of her thighs. The way they both moan at the contact makes her really wish they hadn't gotten out of bed.

The world shifts around her, then, as Mike walks the short distance from the middle of her office to the wall across from her desk, pressing her up against it. The edge of a picture frame hanging on the wall digs into her back, but El barely feels it. Not when the heat of his body licks into her skin, slipping into every crevasse, his weight against hers making her dizzy. He's so *solid* despite his lean height, all broad shoulders and firm planes. It feels like he could so easily engulf her and El wants nothing but to let him do that for the rest of her life.

And then there are his hands, large palms and graceful fingers, knowing just how to hold her and touch her to drive her crazy, to make her want until she all but forgets who she is, until she is nothing more than the reactions he elicits from the things he does to her.

Mike's touching her, now, his hands roaming her torso and hips, trailing down her thighs, gripping her tight through the fabric of her clothing, the resulting friction setting her aflame. El whines at the feeling. Now that she knows how his hands feel on her bare skin, on her most sensitive areas, the sensation of his hands touching her over her clothes is *torture*.

In order to anchor her to *something*, El tries to give him a taste of what she's experiencing. Her hands dance across the firmness of his chest and shoulders, fingernails scoring his skin through his dress shirt. Mike hisses against her mouth, a moan soon following, and before El knows what she's doing, she's got his shirt halfway unbuttoned, just enough for her hands to slip inside to touch him skin to skin. The fact that they're at work is completely incidental, something that's just faded away until it's no longer important or relevant - *out of sight out of mind*. Mike surges against her when she lightly scraps her fingernails against the expanse of his ribcage, just beneath his pectorals, and the feel of him pressing into her has her breaking the kiss, a whispered "oh god" tumbling from her lips.

The dam fully breaks then. His lips trail up her jaw, all suckling kisses and flicking tongue, as he palms her through the silk of her blouse, fingers plucking at the buttons of her blouse to slip them free, his caresses confident and thrilling. Nails digging into his skin, El arches against him, seeking the friction that drives them both wild, that reduces them to creatures of need and desire, unthinking as they lose themselves in one another. Mike's mouth latches onto the patch of skin right by her ear and the sensitive corner of her jaw and she lets out a breathless cry, swooning at the sensory overload - his hands, his mouth, his *body* driving her to forget everything but *him*.

Mike pulls the ends of her blouse out from where she'd tucked them into her slacks and slips his hands beneath the unbuttoned halves. El whimpers and nudges at his jaw with her shoulder, giving her just enough space to recapture his lips with hers when he lifts his head. His hands are on her bare skin now, inching up towards her breasts as he slides them up.

Oh, thank god I wore one of my lacy bras, a very distant corner of her mind thinks, the last part of her that hasn't been consumed with all things *Mike*. Anticipation builds beneath her skin, stealing her breath from her and she waits, feeling like she's on the precipice of losing all control. And she knows, once he touches her there, through the lace, all bets are off.

And then the warning bell rings. 3 minutes until Advising Block starts.

It's like being doused with ice water on a hot day - shocking, enough to calm the frenzy, but not enough to completely extinguish the heat that surrounds them.

Still, it sobers them enough to pull their lips away from each other's, to still their hands where they're touching the other's bare skin. They stare at each other for a brief, heavy moment, wide-eyed and rosy cheeked, lips parted in shock. And then Mike leans in so that his forehead is pressed against hers, her eyes slip shut and, for a couple of seconds, the only sound in her office is the harshness of their breathing as they try to get themselves under control.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to do this," Mike breathes, almost whimpering. "How am I supposed to be in the same room as you and not want you?"

El lets out a noise that is somewhere between a laugh and a sob and she lifts her hands so she can cup his face, her fingers resting against his neck while her thumbs brush lightly against the corners of his jaw. Her eyes are still closed, their bodies still pressed together intimately, and she's really not looking forward to giving up the cocoon of warmth that's surrounding them. "I don't know," she whispers back. "But we'll figure it out. It's either that or one of us finds a new job."

Mike laughs and pulls away enough so that El can look up and see him looking back at her with a smile that makes her racing heart skip a beat, wide and toothy and so freaking cute. Her hands slide down so that they're resting high on his chest and she rests her palms on the ridges of his collarbones. "Well, I do seem to be on the verge of launching a career as a Hollywood scriptwriter. Maybe if I get fired for feeling up the hot guidance counselor, I can give that a go instead."

El lets out a snort before she erupts into giggles, shaking her head at him. "You're not going to get fired for feeling me up." She grins, biting her lip (and completely *does not miss* the way Mike looks down at her lips at the motion). "I do appreciate being called 'hot', though."

"Glad to be of service," Mike says, lips quirking in a grin.

The teasing humor helps cut through the desire that's rolling off of them in waves and El sighs. "Here, we should get straightened up." Her hands leave his skin so she can begin the process of righting their clothes, starting with buttoning up Mike's shirt. An intimate silence falls over them as El slowly fastens his shirt, and Mike leans in once more, forehead gently brushing against hers. Despite the fact that they only have a couple of minutes until he needs to be elsewhere, he makes no move to put her down, neither of them wanting to lose the feel of being tangled up in one another.

Every once in a while, he trembles as her fingers occasionally brush against his bare skin and it makes El feel happy and fuzzy that she can affect him like this. "Sorry," El says, tilting her head as she stares up at him, but Mike just shakes his head, letting her know he doesn't mind. She giggles a second later as she *really* looks at him, all flushed cheeks and mussed up hair, staring down at her with just the most adorably happy expression she's ever seen.

Mike pulls back just a little and his brow furrows even as he arches an eyebrow in curiosity. "What's so funny?"

El shakes her head. "You look a mess," she says. "Rumpled clothes, messy hair...everyone's going to know what we've been getting up to, you know."

"And who's fault is *that?*" Mike asks pointedly, giving her a look. "I wasn't the one who closed and locked the door and started with the kissing, being all seductive about it. You know, if anything, I'm actually a victim, here."

El returns Mike's look with her own pointedly arched eyebrow, glancing down to where Mike's hands are still on her bare waist, thumbs absently caressing her ribcage. "This from the man whose hands are *still* in my shirt? That's rich."

Mike retaliates by dancing his fingers across her ribs, which elicits a squealing laugh from El. "Ooh, someone's ticklish," Mike all but crows, the previous line of conversation dropped, as El tries to squirm away from his touch.

"Don't you dare, Mike Wheeler," El says, gasping against the giggles

that bubble up in her throat.

“Ok, ok,” Mike says, laughing. “But only because I need to go.”

Mike lets El back down to her feet, her legs unwinding from around his waist, and they hurry to straighten out their clothes. Mike has a head start, considering that El mostly buttoned his shirt back up for him, which lets him focus his attention on her seconds later. Only this mainly consists of him running his fingers through her hair and El shivers a couple of moments later as she finishes tucking her blouse back into her slacks. “You’re not helping,” El says, trying to glare up at him, but she can’t stop smiling, so the effect is ruined.

“Just trying to fix your hair,” Mike says. The look on his face is going for wholesome, but the way his eyes twinkle give him away. “A more worthy effort than trying to straighten out this perpetual mess,” he says, gesturing towards his own hair.

El reaches up and smooths down his hair as best she can, combing her fingers through it. “Oh, don’t say that. I like your hair. It makes you look rakish.”

Mike grins, looking both way too pleased and surprised at the same time. “Rakish, huh? I think I like the sound of that.”

“You would,” El says with a smirk. The expression softens as she looks up at him, concerned. “You going to be ok to go teach?”

Mike opens his mouth to answer, but the sound of the bell signaling the start of the Advising Block cuts him off, startling both of them. He grins, breathing out a wry laugh. “Guess I’ll have to be, huh?”

El laughs, smiling so wide she wouldn’t be surprised if her face permanently freezes this way. “And now you’re late.” She bounces up onto her toes, stretching to give Mike a quick kiss, just the briefest brush of her lips against his. She moves towards the door, body protesting the loss of his nearness the entire time, and opens it, keeping her hand braced on the door and giving him an expectant look. “Go do your job, Teacher Man,” she says, feeling cheeky.

Mike just shakes his head at her while he laughs. “Yes, ma’am.” He

brushes past her, pausing after a quick check to give her another brief kiss. “See you at break?”

“Counting on it,” El says, beaming up at him.

She watches him walk away while she leans against the doorway to her office, entranced by the lines of his body, unable to keep from checking him out. *That's all mine*, she thinks with a satisfied purr, a bright, giddy feeling bubbling up in her stomach. El giggles when he turns around to give her a small wave, the look on his face excited and almost shy, just all boyish and adorable.

Mike disappears around a corner a second later and El sighs at his absence. The steady thrum of desire still beats in her veins, but it's mixing with something bigger, something so much more thrilling.

Something that has her counting down the *minutes* until she can see him again.

A little something called “love”.

Mike knows, without even having to think about it, that there was no way he and El were going to be able to keep their relationship a secret. Not when he's this fucking happy, not when they can't stop looking at each other without everything they're feeling written on their faces, not when the space between them fills with affection and tension and the deepest regard he thinks he's ever felt for another human being just about ever.

No, Mike knows that everyone was going to find out sooner rather than later.

But, as he sits in a chair in the front office, El sitting next to him, their knees just touching as they wait to see Mr. Russell, well...he just doesn't think it was going to be *like this*.

But wait, we're skipping ahead a little bit. Let's take a step back, see how we got here....

Mike can't stop smiling as he walks down the hall back to his classroom. His lips are still tingling from El's kisses, his heartbeat still thumping in his chest and echoing in his ears, his skin buzzing with desire that he's somehow managed to reduced down to a low simmer (*it's honestly the best he can manage and, god, he's never going to stop wanting her. it's not even a question. not even close*), and he's trying desperately to refocus on what he needs to do in the first half of this morning - from Advising Block to his first of two Chemistry lectures and then to his Honors Physics class.

But all he can think about is seeing El again, of the kisses they were just trading in her office, of spending all day yesterday pretty much just holding her while he fought off a cold...of the morning they had together in his bed.

He knows he shouldn't be thinking about how good she looked in his bed, naked and eager for the touch of his lips, the caress of his hands, willing and open as she surrendered herself to him. Or the gleam in her eye when she leaned over him, the feel of *her* mouth and hands, teasing him, making him forget everything but the way she touched him. But he can't erase the memories, can't turn off the instant replay that cycles in the back of his mind and it's going to distract him all fucking day.

And somehow, he *needs* to figure out a way to get this under control, at least just enough so he can think clearly. He's supposed to be teaching teenagers - not *acting* like one.

But the best he's going to be able to manage for the moment is to just ignore it and let himself get distracted by the things in front of him. Which, as Mike walks into his classroom, are his 8 advisees, all looking at him with curious, confused eyes as they sit around one of the front lab tables, one empty lab stool set aside for him to sit on.

Mike smiles, trying to go for nonchalant and *chill*, even as his hand comes up to fiddle at his collar, trying to make sure it's straight, trying so hard to ignore the memory of El's hands on his chest not 5 minutes ago, the phantom sensation burning against his skin. "What's with the faces?" Mike asks, clearing his throat with a cough, a combination of nerves and a bit of the lingering illness from the day before.

"You're late," Evan Gonzales says, one of two sophomores who's in his Honors Chemistry class. The way Evan speaks gives weight to the unusual occurrence. Because Mike is *never* late for Advising Block.

"Sorry, I, uh...needed to take care of something," Mike says as he ducks around back behind his demonstration lab table to grab the plastic grocery bag he picked up on his second stop on his way into work.

"Did Ms. Hopper need help?"

The question, spoken with way too much innocence to be natural, makes the plastic bag handles slip from Mike's grip as he's standing, causing two packets of cookies to fall all of two feet to the floor.

Mike swallows and picks the bag back up, fingers firmly wrapped around the handles, straightening to look at the speaker. Jessica Bailey, a senior who is kind of friends with Melanie, is looking back at him with a perfect angel expression, hands folded primly on the lab table in front of her and Mike fights the urge to narrow his eyes at her. *Don't glare at your students. It's unseemly.* Mike takes in a deep breath and moves over to the table, putting the bag down on surface. "She just wanted to talk about something," Mike says, trying to be as vague as possible.

Yeah, if by 'talk about something', you mean 'feverishly make out in her office', his brain oh so helpfully rebuts.

Oh, shut up.

There's a pointed silence, as it seems *none* of his student advisees believe him, not even little freshman Ainsley Peters with her big doe eyes and complete lack of guile. "Alright, let's get this thing going,

shall we?” Mike says once the silence becomes all but unbearable, the skin of the back of his neck prickling with the feeling. It’s like he’s a specimen under a microscope, exposed for everyone to see and he *hates* it. “Who’s turn is it to pick which snack we have today?”

Honestly, the only way to distract teenagers is with food. Especially when the food is *cookies*. “Well, what are the options?” Beth Newman, the other senior in his advisee group, asks. “Oh, and it’s Phil’s turn.” She knows the drill by now, having been a part of it for the entirety of her high school career.

“Yeah, Mr. Wheeler,” Phil says. He’s a tall kid - not as tall as Mike, but not many people are - and a junior on the Varsity Basketball team. “What are my choices?”

Mike grins and removes both packs from the bag, letting the normal rhythms of the Advising Block conversations flow around him. “Well, today we have, either, double chocolate chip or chocolate-covered shortbread. Choose wisely, Phillip.”

It’s a tradition going back to Mike’s first days as a teacher at St. Ignatius, when he’d been nervous about how to handle being a teacher to teenagers when he didn’t feel all that far removed from being one himself, back when his two senior advisees were still freshman, when he was all of 24 years old and had no idea what he was doing. It was Dustin, naturally, who gave him the idea - *Dude, kids fucking love cookies. Or have you forgotten what it's like to be a kid?* - and, so, the following Monday, on maybe Mike’s 3rd or 4th week teaching, he brought in cookies. And, well, the tradition’s stuck ever since.

Phil chooses the chocolate-covered shortbread cookies and the next 30 minutes pass in a blur of conversation - how’d everyone’s Christmas break go, is everyone ready for finals, what electives are they taking next semester - and, just like that, Mike’s back in the groove of teaching. Yes, there’s a significant corner of his mind devoted to all things El - replaying the last 24 hours with as much clarity as he can muster - but Mike just lets it *be* and he finds that the morning goes much easier that way.

(Yes, Melanie and her posse are giving him *looks* all throughout

Honors Physics, all too curious and knowing and, *dammit*, Mike knew he was going to be fucking transparent about it.

Still, they don't actually know and the realization of that fact gives Mike the strength to ignore the looks he's getting from the trio of senior girls.)

When Mike has time, mostly in the quick transition between classes, he thinks about El - and not just how much he wants to kiss her again, though there is a lot of that. No, what he mostly thinks about is the logistics of their "first" date.

(Even though he's still convinced they already *had* their first date, he's not going to argue about this with El, he's just not. After all, he *did* get to see her naked and will again, it seems. Seriously, he's not an *idiot*.)

Mike wants to take El out as soon as possible, and he would tonight, if he could. But he has to get that screenplay done by Friday, which means every night this week is going to need to be spent working on the damn thing. *And* he has that thing at Dustin's. Which he's so not going to skip. Sure he's probably only going to make a quick appearance, but Dustin's up to *something*, which, naturally, means Mike has to find out what the fuck Dustin has planned this time.

Because Dustin's plans have a tendency to either go down in flames or turn into something spectacular and Mike wants to get a sense of which one.

However, that's neither here nor there for the moment. Because Dustin's gonna do what Dustin's gonna do, without Mike's supervision, and Mike *still* needs to figure out when to take El out to dinner and *where*.

During the first break, between Advising Block and 1st Block, Mike settles on Friday as the day. Win or lose, the screenplay thing will resolve itself by then. If Mike gets it done, excellent. And, if not, it's not like waiting until Monday is going to kill the movie studio.

(*Or is it?* Mike's brain whispers with a distinct undertone of anxiety. But Mike just ignores it.)

No, Friday night, El's schedule willing, Mike's going to take her out to dinner. He's going to wine and dine her, because it's nothing less than she deserves. (*she deserves everything. so why she's with him is a question he doesn't know if he's ever going to understand the answer to.*) And, then, at the end of the night, he's going to drop her off at her place, where *hopefully* she'll invite him inside where they can pick back up from where they were before the alarm interrupted them earlier this morning.

And the thought of *that*, of finally sleeping with her, brings with it a whole host of other questions, ones he knows he should have thought about sooner. They'd gotten interrupted before they could go all the way, but there are some logistical matters that now Mike can't help but mull over in the back of his mind. Like being safe. It's been a while (*three years*, his brain whispers traitorously), so he's clean. But Mike doesn't want to presume about El, even though he's almost 100% sure she is, as well. And then there's the matter of birth control. Is she on something? Or does he need to go buy protection? Again, he doesn't want to presume. And informed consent is always a good thing. More than that, it's the *right* thing.

Though, while incredibly important, none of this is really material for the date itself. Given what happened in El's office not that long ago, Mike knows it's only a matter of time before they end up actually having sex, regardless of where and when he takes her out to dinner.

(And the way the testosterone-fueled part of him fucking *fist pumps* at the thought makes Mike almost want to roll his eyes. Guess there are parts of him that are very typical male, after all.)

Which brings Mike's full attention back to the date he wants to take her on. And his stomach sinks as a thought occurs to him.

Shit, where is he going to take her?

After having to cancel at the same restaurant twice in only a few days, Mike's hesitant to try and schedule *another* reservation with them. Added on to that, realistically speaking, Mike knows he only has until the end of the afternoon to figure it out if he wants to grab a reservation at a restaurant worth a damn. *So, you know, no pressure or anything.*

Maybe I'll just ask her what kind of place she'd prefer, narrow down my options, Mike thinks as his Honors Physics class wraps up, the sound of the bell signaling the start of the mid-morning break.

Mike grins. *Yeah, asking her sounds like a great idea. Right now, in fact.* His blood begins racing in his veins as he leaves his classroom, the students mostly gone off to enjoy their 15 minutes of freedom. He can't help the way his excitement ratchets up. Just the thought of seeing her again, even if it's only been a couple of hours, fills him with nothing but anticipation and happiness.

The halls are filled with students as they all gravitate towards the locker area, where they can hang out with their friends and just be teenagers until two more hours of class are thrust upon them. Mike's headed in the opposite direction - upstream, as it is - but the crowd parts for him easily.

Looks like being a teacher *does* have its advantages.

The halls are all but empty by the time Mike gets to El's open office door and he slows his steps as he stands in the entryway. He slips his hands into his pockets as he leans against the doorframe, propped up by his shoulder, and he almost sighs at the sight of her.

El hasn't quite noticed him yet, caught up in whatever she's doing. There's an open file folder spread out in front of her that she's writing notes on, her eyes flicking back and forth between what she's writing and whatever she's referencing. The look on her face is one of concentration, focused and completely in the moment. It's incredibly attractive - not that Mike thinks that El could ever be anything but - and his heart races a little bit faster as he remembers the times she's looked at *him* like that, like there was nothing else in the entire world that mattered.

El's seated, so only her upper body is visible, but Mike lets his gaze travel over what he *can* see, drinking in the sight of her svelte frame, of the light purple silk blouse she's wearing that clings to every rise and fall of her body. He can't help it as his gaze lingers on her breasts, a flash of heat suffusing every inch of him as he remembers the sight of her pressed up against the wall, shirt hanging open to reveal the fabric of her bra - white and sheer and lacy, cutting low

across the swell of her curves, tempting and teasing, *begging* for the touch of his hands.

Ok, not the time to be thinking about feeling her up, he thinks, giving himself a mental shake to push the thoughts to the back of his mind. He's got a couple of things to ask her, after all.

So, with a grin, Mike removes one of his hands from its pocket and reaches out with a knuckle to rap on the doorframe.

The sound of someone knocking on her office door pierces through the veil of concentration surrounding her and El startles a bit as she looks up from the student file she's working on. There's a brief second of frustration at getting interrupted mid-thought, but it disappears in a flash when she sees Mike standing in the doorway, one hand in his pocket, leaning against the frame, looking cool and devil-may-care, way too attractive for his own good.

El smiles, unable to hold back and she puts her pen down. "Hey, stranger," she says, getting to her feet.

Mike snickers and takes a couple of steps into her office, the carpet muffling his footfalls as he faces her from the other side of her desk. "You look surprised to see me. Lose track of time?" he asks with crossed arms and a teasing smile.

El did, actually. She was so caught up with making notes in the files of the transfer student she met with that morning, that she missed the bell signaling the start of the morning break. But, she isn't about to admit that to Mike - she does have *some* pride, after all. So, El just shrugs as she makes her way over to him, the flutter in her heart approaching hummingbird beat the closer she gets. "Maybe I'm just more dedicated than you, ever think of that? So much so that I can ignore all earthly distractions?"

"You telling me you're a harder worker than I am?" Mike asks, eyebrow arched, a smirk dancing across his lips. "This, after all the

things I did for you this morning.” Mike gestures his hand in a vague circling motion, fingers gracefully long and arching.

El sucks in a sharp breath at the rush of memory of just *what* he did to her, like a flipbook of erotic images being thumbed through in her mind. Her face heats up and El feels the beginnings of desire begin to pool low in her belly, all swooping and dizzying. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,” El says, voice coy and oozing with apology, sounding way too breathy to her own ears. “Let me make it up to you.”

El stands just in front of him and she bites her lip to fight the wild grin that threatens to break out across her face. Mike’s close enough that she can feel the gentle warmth radiating from him and the air around her fills with the smell of him - the freshness of clean laundry and the sandalwood of his aftershave. It’s a smell that’s as addicting as it’s becoming familiar, a combination of scents El will forever associate with Mike Wheeler.

But what’s dominating her attention right at this moment is the dark, heavy look he’s giving her right now, gaze dropping down to her mouth, where her teeth are still nibbling at her lower lip. His eyebrow seems to arch even further up into his brow and his lips part, tongue flicking out to wet them. “What did I say about biting your lip?” he asks. El shivers at the sound of his voice, ragged and husky and full of the kind of warning that sends warmth zipping across every nerve.

“Not to do it because you like it too much,” El says, letting go of her lip so her mouth can fully stretch with the smile that’s been building for the past minute or so. “So, what are you doing to do about it?”

Mike doesn’t answer...at least, not with words.

El blinks and Mike’s suddenly leaning in, ducking his head so he can capture her lips while he pulls her towards him. His hands to go her hips, lifting her slightly, and El whimpers as she kisses him back, stretching up on her toes to more fully press her mouth against his. Her hand comes up to clutch the back of his head, her fingers tugging against the thick locks beneath her touch, and Mike retaliates by pulling her even more flush against him while tracing the seam of her

lips with his tongue. El moans and, when she curls her body into his so that their chests press together, he echoes the sound. His moan reverberates in his chest and the accompanying rumble ripples through her torso.

God, this feels good, being this close to Mike - his mouth on hers, body hard and warm as he leans over her, engulfing her in his embrace.

She never wants to stop doing this.

But, unfortunately, that's not in the cards for today.

"Hey, um, Ms. Hopper, I-" A voice, high-pitched and nervous, breaks off with a gasp just as El registers the sound. "Oh my god!"

El and Mike break apart only far enough so they can both look at who interrupted them. El's heart leaps into her throat and it feels like her whole body's gone numb, she's so startled.

Because standing in the doorway to her office is one of the students, a junior girl who's name is Ophelia or Odelia or something like that, who's dropped by El's office a couple of times over the past few months to ask advice about how to balance her course load. And, right now, she's standing there, looking at Mike and El, who are still holding on to each other, with her jaw dropped, mouth parted in shock, hands frozen halfway up to her face, like she wants to clap her hands over her mouth in surprise but just got stuck on the way.

"Ophelia," Mike speaks, stuttering just a bit. The grip he has on El's hips loosens and he turns towards the girl, whose expression of shock is fading into one of gleeful surprise. "Ophelia, I - we -"

Ophelia sucks in a deep breath, lips spreading into wide grin. "Oh my god. Just - *oh my god!*" With that, Ophelia turns and practically *runs* away. Somehow, El knows that, in a relative matter of minutes, the entire school is going to know.

El doesn't care, though. She never had any plans of hiding this in the first place. In fact, she wants *everyone* to know that she's dating Mike Wheeler, that he's *hers* and no one else's.

But, right now, the man she has just laid claim to (even if it's only in her head), is looking shell-shocked, mouth hanging open just a little bit, which makes him look a lot like a gaping fish. El smiles and reaches up for Mike, her hands gently resting on the curves between his neck and shoulders. "Hey, everything ok?" El knows *she's* ok with everyone on campus knowing about her and Mike, but she doesn't know if Mike is. They haven't talked about it, really - it was one of the things El had wanted to make sure gets brought up on their first date, but guess she doesn't have to have that conversation now, does she?

Panic suddenly flutters to life in her stomach as something occurs to her. What if Mike doesn't want everyone to know? *God*, what if he wants to *hide* their relationship?

Mike lets out a shaky breath and groans. "That's...not how I imagined everyone at this school finding out."

El giggles softly as she rubs slow, calming circles on the skin of Mike's neck, feeling his pulse race lightning fast beneath her touch. Meanwhile, all her panic from a couple of seconds ago bleeds away when she hears the implication of Mike's words, that he *doesn't* want to hide what they have. "Well, I give it until the end of the lunch block before *everyone* knows, but yeah, probably not the most subtle way to let that cat out of the bag."

Mike narrows his eyes at her, a glimmer of humor piercing through the uneasiness. "Are you implying that there's *actually* a subtle way to let a cat out of a bag?" he teases, a ghost of a smile tugging up his lips. His hands have reaffirmed their grip on her hips, his touch warm through her clothes.

El sighs, amused and a little incredulous about what just happened - for god's sake, she and Mike just got caught making out in her office - and she smiles up at him, feeling bright and teasing. "Guess there isn't," she says, just on the verge of giggling. "At least we didn't take out a skywriter to let everyone know."

"Or one of those airplanes with the banner trailing behind it," Mike says, picking up the beat of her teasing.

““Mike + El: It’s A Thing’.”

“Read’em and weep, boys: she’s off the market.””

El gasps and presses a dramatic hand to her chest. “Are you implying you *bought* me?”

Mike grins. “Not yet,” he says, eyebrows wagging. “Still gotta take you out on that date, remember?” He sobers a bit and his grin fades into a soft smile. “It’s what I came over to talk to you about, though. So, I’m thinking Friday, if you’re available.”

“I am completely and 100% available,” El says, giggling. “You’re not going to postpone on me again, are you? Might make a girl start to question.”

Mike just gives her a look, eyebrow arched, almost exasperated. “Please, come hell or high water, I am taking you out to dinner on Friday.” He pauses, the look on his face becoming a little more uncertain. “So...any preferences on where we go?”

El pokes Mike in the side, just enough to make him squirm. “I thought you had that all taken care of. That romantic Italian restaurant, remember?”

Mike cringes. “Well, I’ve cancelled on them twice now and it just feels...like maybe it’s jinxed or something. Besides, they might refuse to give me *another* reservation.”

El looks up at him flatly, lips twisted in a wry grin while she tries to teasingly glare at him. “Michael Wheeler, you call that restaurant and make another reservation. Use a different name if it makes it easier. I can guarantee you, though, they’re not going to care if you use the same name. But you promised me romantic Italian.”

Mike grins, face relaxing, and he breathes out a soft laugh. “I promised, huh?”

El lets her hands reach up to twine behind his neck, her fingers gently playing with the ends of his hair. “You did when you described it to me so beautifully. And I *really* want to go there.” She’s pouting a little, but she’s also smiling and she loves how playful Mike makes

her, how he makes her want to be a little silly and coy and teasing.

“Alright, we’ll go there,” Mike says before he leans over to brush a soft kiss against her lips. His lips linger on hers for several, long seconds and El feels like she’s going to float away into a cloud of happiness. He stays near when the kiss ends and one of his hands comes up to push her hair behind her ear, fingers dancing through the strands as he rests his palm on her neck. “Oh, I did have another question for you,” he says, voice hushed and intimate.

“Hmm, hit me,” El says a little breathlessly, overwhelmed as she so often is by the simple act of his touch on her skin.

Mike smiles and there’s a flash of heat in the expression, his face filling with a look that is fond and confident all at the same time. “I was thinking about this morning, back at my place, and I know we got interrupted before we could actually, you know, *be together*. But it occurred to me that we haven’t actually talked about the logistics of having sex.” Mike pauses, face going a little red, and El feels like her breath’s been stolen from her lungs. “And, I know, it’s not very sexy to talk about, like at all. But I didn’t want us to go into this without being fully informed. Like, is there anything I need to know? And do I need to buy anything like condoms or-?”

“I have an IUD,” El says in a rush, almost in awe of the man in front of her, of his consideration and caring and *worry*.

Plus, the way Mike’s face screws up in confusion is just adorable and it’s just one more reason El loves him. “A what, now?”

El giggles. “An implant. Got it a few years ago to make my life easier. So, I appreciate the worry, but I’m covered on the birth control front.” She smiles, eyebrow quirking. “*And I’m clean, so no worries there.*” This is, by far, the most responsible, adult conversation she’s ever had with another man about their sex life (or *impending* sex life, as the case may be right now). And El really wishes she knew why she finds herself getting hot and bothered by this, why *this* is something that’s kind of turning her on.

Mike lets out a low laugh and nods. “Good, that’s good. I’m clean, too, by the way. I just....” He trails off, looking down at her with a

look that is so *sure*, caring and protective and just resolute, like Mike lives to help and care for others. “I just wanted to make sure you feel safe, that you *are* safe.” There’s a break, then, a crack in Mike’s confidence that leaves him looking a little shy and bashful. “I don’t know,” he says, trying to shake it off. “Informed consent is important and - hey, where are you going?”

El doesn’t answer. Can’t, actually. Not when the only thing she wants to do with her mouth is kiss Mike and never, *ever* stop. There are times when El is convinced that Mike is a wish she made came to life, like he’s been plucked out of every desire and dream she’s ever had.

El’s been with a handful of guys in her lifetime and none of them *ever* cared enough about making sure they were being safe and checking to make sure that they were initiating their sexual relationship with eyes wide open, never checked about making sure they were protected. None of them ever made her feel as safe and cherished and *cared for* the way Mike does effortlessly. It’s literally the hottest thing a man has *ever* done for her, the way he talked to her about it, his voice sure if a little shy, but willing to overcome any embarrassment if it means having an open, honest conversation where she feels respected and looked out for.

El wants to show him just how much she appreciates him, just how *touched* she is by his consideration. God, she *needs* to do it.

And she can’t do that with an open office door.

With a swift sweep of her arm, El closes and locks her office door before taking the handful of steps back to Mike. She reaches for him, fingers curling into his shirt so she can pull him down for a fierce kiss that makes both of them breathless. Mike’s hands immediately go to her hair, fingers weaving among the locks even as he lets out a surprised, pleased sound, a low groan emanating from his chest, and El pulls back just enough to whisper against his mouth. “Informed consent is *really* sexy, just so you know,” she says.

El’s eyes are mostly closed, heavy with desire, so she feels more than sees the smile that tugs at Mike’s lips. “That’s good to know.”

El kisses Mike again while her hands coming up to press against his

chest, fingers dipping beneath the folded collar of his shirt. His hands are *everywhere* - combing through her hair, grazing up and down her back, gripping her hips - and El revels in the sparks that explode at his touch as their mouths move against each other with deep, *passionate* kisses that threaten to devour her. "How are you so perfect?" she asks after a couple of minutes, pulling away just enough to look at him..

"I don't think I'm anywhere close to perfect," Mike manages to get out, his voice ragged from the way he's breathing hard, chest heaving against hers.

"Hmm, beg to differ, Mr. Wheeler," El says, just above a whisper. They don't have much time, not when break is only 15 minutes long and they're probably coming up against the halfway point. And El figures it's probably not fair to either of them to get so worked up and caught up in desire when they'll just have to stop.

God, does she really not want to stop.

But, she does, sighing as she stretches up to kiss him one last time before lowering back down to her feet, her hands still fiddling with his collar. She looks up at him, eyes meeting his, and marvels at the way Mike looks back at her, like his entire world is standing before him. El's never had anyone look at her the way Mike is right now and it makes her feel like she can do anything. "You're amazing, you know that?" El says, breathing out an incredulous laugh.

Mike smiles shyly and the blush that splashes across his cheeks is not just from the desire between them that's calming back down to a low simmer. "I'm glad you think so, but, really, I'm nothing special."

It breaks El's heart to hear the self-deprecating tone in Mike's voice and she leans up, brushing her nose against his in a light Eskimo kiss. "You're special to me."

"Then that's all that matters to me. Don't really care about what anyone else thinks as long as I have you," Mike says with a quiet laugh and a soft sigh. His head shifts so he can press his forehead against hers and El leans into the touch, breathing him in slowly, luxuriating in how close he is.

“Well, you got me,” El says. Her eyes slip shut as her fingers curl up around his neck, peeking out from under his collar to run through his hair just above the nape of his neck, her fingernails lightly scraping against his scalp in a way that makes him lightly moan.

“Good,” Mike says and, for a long moment, there’s only the sounds of their breathing as they just *exist* in each other’s company. El knows that, while they’re here in her office, behind the locked door, everything’s safe and calm. But the second that door opens and Mike goes back to class, El knows the deluge will be upon them and what she and Mike are building between the two of them is going to be all anyone’s going to want to talk to her about. Because El knows that it won’t take long for their co-workers to find out (if they haven’t already figured it out); no, the teachers of St. Ignatius are too dialed in to the gossip that flows among the student body and teachers making out on campus is *definitely* student body gossip material.

Mike must be thinking something along similar lines (and, god what El wouldn’t give to be able to read his mind, to know that he is only ever a thought away from her), because he sighs and pulls back, hands dropping to her hips to nudge at her. “Well, I should get going. Classes to prepare for and all that. Need to fortify myself against all the whispering and giggling that’s going to be happening behind my back today.”

“I’m sorry,” El says as she drops her hands from behind his neck, her fingers trailing lightly down his chest. “I never wanted you to feel uncomfortable.”

“Hey,” Mike says, his hands coming up to cover hers, palms warm on the back of her hands. “You never have to be sorry for anything. I wouldn’t change this for the world. The students can tease me and gossip about me all they want. You’re who I care about and if you’re not embarrassed, I’ll try not to be, either.”

“I could never be embarrassed by you,” El says, stretching up for one last kiss. “Go prepare for your classes. And don’t let those kids walk all over you.”

Mike gives El one last look as they go over to her office door to open it, his lips twitching with a grin. “Oh, I’ll try. I try everyday,

actually.” One final, *final* kiss - until lunch, that is. “Maybe, one day, I’ll actually succeed.”

The giggles start almost immediately.

Quietly whispered behind Mike’s back or when he’s not looking, ceasing immediately when his gaze lands on the potential source.

All eyes are on him, it feels like, like he’s an exhibit in a freak show or something.

It’s a familiar feeling, unfortunately. Mike spent almost all of his adolescence being laughed at and teased, most of it bullying. This time, though, it’s for a completely amazing reason. This time, it’s because he got caught making out with his girlfriend (*holy shit*).

And he can give the perpetrators detention if he feels like it.

So, all in all, it’s *loads* better than being back in middle and high school.

Especially because, at the end of the day, Mike gets to be with the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen, a woman who wants to be with him for reasons that Mike still can’t figure out and probably never will.

So, Mike puts up with the giggles and the knowing looks and the sly grins. He knows it’s partly because they care, but also because they love seeing real life drama unfold before their eyes. But Mike can’t help but be unnerved by the way the students are looking at him expectantly, like at any moment El’s going to walk into the room and two of them will just start making out, or something. In front of everyone.

Yeah, that’s not happening.

But it’s not just the students who give Mike strange looks and knowing smiles. It’s his *coworkers* as well. Mike’s day is filled with

comments like “so, you and the pretty dance teacher, huh?” to “I knew something was going on between the two of you” when he leaves his classroom to get some water or grab his lunch...even when he’s in the bathroom.

All of it makes Mike realize just how *invested* the whole school is in his relationship with El. Mike doesn’t know whether to be concerned or flattered, but at the very least, it’s somewhat amusing.

In fact, it’s something he can’t help but laugh about with El after school ends for the day. He needs to get home soonish to keep cranking out that screenplay, and El has somewhere she needs to be by 5:30 for dance lessons, but there’s enough time for them to sit in her office snuggled on her couch, door shut and firmly locked behind them, and just spend time together before they have to go their separate ways.

“God, everyone’s looking at us like we’re an exhibit at a zoo,” Mike says, chortling a little as he lets his head drop back onto the couch cushions. “I can’t tell you how many times I caught my students giggling at me and giving me *looks*.”

“They’ll get over it,” El says from right next to him. She has one leg draped across his thighs and an arm wrapped around his midsection, nestled up against him. One of Mike’s hands rests on her thigh where it stretches across his, thumb caressing her just above the knee, while his other arm wraps around her shoulders to hold her close. She’s lithe and warm and she fits so perfectly tucked up next to him that Mike can’t help but think this is meant to be. It’s like he’s been waiting his whole life to find her and now that he has, he feels like he’s *always* known her, like he has a hard time remembering the time before El stepped into his life.

“Yeah, when?” Mike asks with a soft sigh. “Don’t get me wrong, if I have to be stared at and whispered about behind my back, I would very much rather it be because I got caught making out with you than for why I *used* to get made fun of when I was a kid. I can just see it getting really annoying because it’s *already* annoying.”

El leans up and presses a gentle, lingering kiss to the edge of his jaw. Her lips are soft and warm and she kisses him in such a way that she

tugs lightly on his skin as she pulls back. Mike shivers a bit at the sensation and a gasp sticks in the back of his throat, even as his soul sings with happiness. That she touches him so freely, and lets him touch her in return, is a gift that Mike will forever be grateful he gets to experience and cherish. “Oh, you know high school,” El says, breathing the words against his skin. “Something else will explode and we’ll be forgotten, left in the dust of the annals of high school gossip.”

Mike laughs, tilting his head so he can press his cheek against her hair. “God, I hope so.”

“Just wait until the Trio confronts you, though,” El says, giggling. “Then you’ll *really* wish for something else to take the focus off of us.”

There’s a knowing tone in El’s voice and Mike lets out an almost tortured groan. “Wait, did they come by your office today?”

El lifts her head so she can look up at him, amusement dancing across her features, lips twisted in a wry smile. “You think they *wouldn’t*?” She bites her lip, giggling softly, and Mike starts to lean in to kiss her - *that damn lip bite* - but she speaks before he can finish closing the gap. “They practically accosted me during their free earlier this afternoon.”

Mike breathes out a laugh, but he doesn’t move away. Her face is only inches away from his and there’s no power on this earth that could pull him away before he’s ready. His senses are overwhelmed with her proximity and it’s the best feeling in the entire universe. “What did they say?” he asks, voice dropping to a low murmur, as he reaches out and grabs a lock of her hair, loosely wrapping the strands around his first two fingers as he pulls it through his grip, feeling the softness of her hair slide across his skin.

“They were going a million miles a minute,” El says, her own voice sounding a little breathless and hushed. “Asking me a bunch of questions, talking over each other the entire time. They were like the Chipettes, or something, all high pitched and excited. I ended up shooing them away when I was able to get through to them that I had actual work to do and talking about my personal relationships does

not constitute work. But I have a feeling they'll be back *and* that they'll try the same on you tomorrow."

"Hmm, can't wait," Mike says, half distracted by just how close El is, looking up at him with those beautiful, golden brown eyes, full lips just barely parted, cheeks lightly flushed.

"But, enough about anyone else, though," El says. "I have about a half an hour before I need to leave. So why aren't we kissing?"

Mike grins, an expression that El mirrors. "I don't know. Why aren't we?"

El shifts against him, moving so she can swing her leg all the way over his lap, her knees on either side of his hips, while her hands come up to clasp behind his neck. "It's a very good question," El says and Mike groans as the full weight of her settles on his thighs.

"Is it a question that has an answer?" Mike asks, his own hands coming up to land high on her back before trailing down to her hips, the silk of her shirt gliding beneath his palms.

"If the answer is that we're idiots who are talking when we could be fooling around in my office for the next 30 minutes, then yes, yes it has an answer," El says. She's smiling so bright, now, that it blinds Mike to everything but the beauty of the woman in front of him.

"Hmm, you should fix that," Mike says, adopting a Very Serious Tone, even though he's smiling right back at her. His hands are moving ahead of his brain, one pressed against her stomach while the other comes up to tease the top buttons of her blouse, slipping them slowly from the buttonholes. Mike figures it's fair because El's pretty much doing the same, her hands about one third of the way down his shirt, the heat of her palms bleeding into his ribcage through the fabric as her fingers work at the buttons

El nods and tries to put on a serious face, but she's too happy looking for it to fully set. "You're right, I should."

She kisses him, then, or he kisses her - Mike's not sure which - both of them leaning in, mouths pressing against each other in a kiss that

lights him up all over, warmth exploding in his veins.

In a half hour, they'll both have to leave, Mike to go work on his screenplay and El for her dance lessons for the spring musical.

But, for right now, in this moment, it's just the two of them - touching bare skin as they remove clothing until they're all but naked, all roaming hands and eager mouths, gasping and moaning as they touch each other, move against each other, *please* each other.

It's not *exactly* what Mike wants. No, he wants long nights in bed, waking up together in the morning, being able to take his time as he touches her and loves her.

It's enough for now, though, enough to hold him over until Friday.

And, when they finally go their separate ways, Mike giving El a final kiss goodnight as walks her to her car, which is parked only a couple of spots away from his, he's not at all thinking about the repercussions of getting caught making out with his coworker.

Not at all.

It's almost lunch when it happens.

It's a typical Chicago winter day: freezing, partly cloudy. El wakes up that morning to temperatures that are just below freezing and a fog that seeps into her bones with icy fingers. She misses Mike's warmth and spends way too long hugging him when she finally sees him that morning, trying to pull his warmth into her own skin.

"Well, aren't you a little koala bear?" Mike teases her after a solid 30 seconds of her hugging him.

"You're warm and I'm cold," El says, face muffled in his sweater. "And don't act like you don't like it."

Mike hugs her tighter, his arms solid around her, and kisses the top of

her head. “Fine, you got me there.”

It’s a blissful moment in a day that is just *frantic*. It seems like *everyone* is walking by her office today, peering in curiously or giving her sly looks when they catch her eye. A couple say actually come in and say hi - her coworkers, mostly.

Liz Hiroto is one of them, knocking on her open door just after morning break has ended.

El looks up at the sound and gives Liz a small smile as she turns away from her computer screen. “Hey.”

“Hey, there,” Liz says. “You got a minute?”

El keeps the smile on her face, even as her stomach is twisting a bit. “Sure, what’s up?” It’s a lie; El *knows* why Liz is here.

“Just wanted to see how you were doing. The whole school’s talking about you and Mike. Some *pretty* interesting rumors swirling around.” Liz sits down and crosses one leg over the other. “Is it true a student caught the two of you half naked in here?”

For a second, El gapes at Liz before shocked panic floods her veins, making her hands and feet feel almost numb and tingling. “Oh my god!” El says in what can only be described as a screaming whisper. She hurries to her feet and *runs* over to shut the door before whirling around to face her friend. “Where did you hear that?” God, is *that* what’s been floating around, what the students are all giggling about?

“Overheard it in my morning AP Calc section,” Liz says, one eyebrow arching in curious concern as she watches El go back to her desk. “So, is it?”

“Is what?” El asks as she sits back down, all but collapsing onto the chair.

“Is it true? The half-naked bit, not that you’re together,” Liz says, clarifying. “The fact that the two of you are together is plain to anyone who has eyes. I knew the second I saw the two of you during last week’s staff meeting.”

El groans and leans forward, face buried in her hands. She hadn't been worried about being caught making out earlier. But the salaciousness of the rumors is changing that at a pace that is dizzying with how fast it is. "This is horrible."

"Well, it's not *great*," Liz says. "But I take it it's not true, from your reaction."

"We were kissing," El says. "The door was open and we weren't thinking, but we were just kissing." She lifts her head from her hands. "I swear, that's it." El absolutely *does not* mention what happened *after* school hours were over, which is a lot closer to the description of the rumors that are apparently floating around.

Liz smiles and the expression is sympathetic. "I believe you. But I know what it's like, a new relationship, and I know it's easy to get caught up in it. Also, I just thought you should know what everyone's saying."

El chews on the inside of her cheek, fingernail picking at the wood grain of her desk. "How bad is this going to be? The fallout?" Because there's going to be a fallout. There can't *not* be and the realization scares El.

"Probably not as bad as you're imagining right now," Liz says with a shrug. "But I wouldn't be surprised if you get called in to the Principal's office."

Which is exactly what happens.

A little before lunch, Liz long gone and back to her own classroom to teach her last morning class, *another* knock on El's door pulls her out of her thoughts, which are a lot more steeped in panic than they were a couple of hours ago.

El looks up, feeling dread trickle coldly down between her shoulder blades, and almost gulps at the sight of Janet, the front desk receptionist. "Hello, El," she says, smile kind if a little cool.

El smiles back, trying for calm and collected, but afraid she's probably coming across as manic. "Hi Janet, what can I do for you?"

"Mr. Russell would like to see you in his office in 15 minutes, right before lunch."

This time, El *does* gulp. Janet's words, while quiet, are spoken without room for argument. *It's not a request, it's a demand.* But, El nods anyway, breathing deeply to quell the panic. "Of course. I'll be there shortly."

"Thank you, El," Janet says before she turns heel and walks away, disappearing from El's doorway with fading footsteps.

Once Janet's out of sight, El lets her shoulder slump, her forearms folded on the table while she buries her face in her arms. She lets herself drown in self-pity for about 30 seconds, letting out a very childish whimper as her brain swirls with panic. *I'm going to get fired, or disciplined, or chewed out. I have to go the principal's office! I've never been called to the principal's office! Oh god, this is going to suck so bad....*

But, once those 30 seconds are over, El forces herself to push aside the self-pity, her stubbornness and self-righteousness rising to the surface. Neither she or Mike have done anything wrong; there aren't rules against teachers dating (El double checked after hearing it from Antoinette). And, besides, what El and Mike were caught doing was honestly just kissing. Yes, it was a little heated - or, *a lot* heated, as the case may be - but it wasn't *scandalous* or anything. They were both fully clothed (when they got caught, that is) and their hands weren't anywhere inappropriate (again, *at the time*). Yes, maybe they really shouldn't be kissing during work hours; El thinks that's certainly reasonable. But, at worst, it was a temporary lapse of judgment.

Definitely not worth being *fired* over.

The thought helps and El's able to calm her heartbeat from frantic down to just racing. And, when it's a couple of minutes before she's supposed to meet with Mr. Russell, El gets up, smoothing down her clothes so she can be as presentable and put together as possible, and goes just down the hall to the front office, head held high.

Mike rounds the corner just as she's approaching and El's heart does

it's normal skipping pitter-patter at the sight of him, so fucking gorgeous in his slacks and sweater, just looking like every dream she's ever had.

Mike smiles when he sees her, though it's tinged with a little bit of uncertainty and fear. El stops to wait for him to approach so they can enter the office together - might be nice to present a unified front, if she stops to think about it long enough - and she leans towards him when he's close enough, like every cell in her body is reaching for him. El can't help it, really - she just wants to always be *closer* to him.

"Hey," she says when he's right next to her, her hand reaching out so that their fingers brush against each others.

Mike lets his fingers tangle with hers for a brief moment before he withdraws, using his hand to gently guide her towards the office. "Hey," he says. "So, uh...guess we're in trouble."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, El smiles. "Just so you know, I blame you for this," she says. "It's your fault you're so irresistible."

Mike lets out a wounded, outraged gasp that El knows is 100% fake. "Excuse me? Um, no. If anyone here is irresistible, it's *you*."

El looks up at him and knows, no matter what happens in the next 10 to 15 minutes, she could *never* regret this, regret *him*. "How about we agree that we're *both* irresistible, especially to each other."

"Ok, I guess I can live with that," Mike says, chuckling a bit as they walk in through the doorway to the front office.

Immediately, a hush comes over them, a quiet sobering that leaves them both feeling a little embarrassed. Here they are, *flirting*, when they're about to be reprimanded for kissing on school grounds. El looks at Mike, the two of them exchanging bashful looks, before they both sit down in the chairs in the receiving area. Neither of them look at Janet, who gives them both a look El can see out of the corner of her eye, and El wonders what's going on in the older woman's head. Is it curiosity? Nosiness? Disapproval? El's not sure, but she's not about to ask since she's a little afraid of the answer.

After a couple of seconds, El feels a light tap against her knee and she looks down to see Mike's knee just touching hers, warm through the layers of their clothing, and his physical presence is reassuring. If she has to go through this, at least it's with him by her side.

They only wait there about a minute before movement from the direction of Mr. Russell's office catches El's attention. Mr. Russell is standing there, looking across with an inscrutable expression on his face. "Mr. Wheeler, Ms. Hopper, please, come on in."

El rushes to get to her feet, Mike right beside her, and she lets herself look over at him. He smiles over at her, trying to be reassuring, but El can see the anxiety bubbling on the surface, the same anxiety that races through her veins and makes her palms feel clammy.

Time passes in a hazy, molasses-like blur as El makes her way into Mr. Russell's office, Mike's presence right behind her the entire time. And, before she's fully aware of what's happening, El's sitting down in front of Mr. Russell's desk and trying to keep her breathing even. *It's going to be fine*, she tells herself. *Just fine. You're not going to get fired today.*

To calm herself, El employs a trick Hop taught her when she was a little girl. *If you ever feel overwhelmed by anything*, he'd told her. *Just take a deep breath and focus on cataloging your surroundings. Where are you? What do you see? Describe it to yourself until you feel like you're in control.*

So, El takes a deep breath and looks around the room she's only ever been in once, on her first day at St. Ignatius when Mr. Russell welcomed her to the staff. It's a fairly large office, at least compared to hers, and it's mostly lit with natural light streaming in through two large windows across from her, behind Mr. Russell's desk. The walls, painted in a neutral gray color, are filled with hanging frames - diplomas, awards, photos, and there are bookshelves off to her left, floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with books and other decorative odds-and-ends. There's a row of file cabinets opposite the bookshelves, the tops covered with a couple of plants, a few more picture frames, and a personal coffee maker.

All this only takes El a couple of seconds to take in, but it's enough to

steady her and she glances over to her right to look at Mike, who's sitting next to her, still smiling with the same false bravado. El wants to reach for him, wants to grab his hand and lace their fingers together, but she figures this really isn't the best time to be touching him.

Not when that's why you're here in the first place, her brain oh so helpfully reminds her.

The creak of leather brings El's attention back to Mr. Russell as he sits in his desk chair. He leans back, elbows resting on the arms of his chair, hands loosely clasped across his torso. He's smiling at them know, but it's a cryptic smile, almost maddeningly placid, and El *desperately* wants to know what he's thinking - or, really, if she's still going to have a job in about 5 minutes.

And, when Mr. Russell *does* speak, it's calm and professional and gives El absolutely *no* hint what's about to happen. "Mr. Wheeler, Ms. Hopper, thank you for coming to meet with me," Mr. Russell says, like there was any other choice on Mike and El's part. He looks back and forth between Mike and El for a brief second and El hears Mike let out a nervous cough. Mr. Russell shifts in his seat a second later, leaning forward with his clasped hands now resting on the desk, shirtsleeves braced on the wooden surface. "Now, look, we're all adults here, so I'll cut to the chase. There are some, shall we say, *interesting* rumors floating around out there about the two of you. Now, I know the students can be prone to flights of fancy, but there's a consistency here that makes me think there's some truth to the rumors." He pauses, looking intently at the both of them. "There is, isn't there?"

El feels like her voice has been robbed from her, but Mike rushes to fill the silent void. "We were just—"

At that, Mr. Russell holds up a hand. "I have no doubt that whatever the students are saying is a gross exaggeration." Mr. Russell smiles, looking almost fond. "And, believe it or not, I was your age once. I remember what it was like when I first met my wife, those early days of young love. So, trust me, I do understand. And while there is no policy on the books against teachers dating, I do ask that you two keep your private relationship just that - *private*. Be professional

during school hours and we'll have no problems, the three of us." Mr. Russell sits up a bit, looking a little more relaxed. "Sound fair?"

All of the sudden, it's like the air just *whooshes* out of her and El smiles, feeling almost giddily relieved. "Sounds *more* than fair," El says, unable to keep the hint of a giggle out of her voice. "Thank you."

"Yeah, thank you, sir," Mike says.

"Don't call me 'sir', Mr. Wheeler," Mr. Russell says, almost on reflex, with a look that is just shy of exasperated. "Now, go on. Enjoy your lunch."

Mike and El both get up and are nearly out the door when Mr. Russell calls from behind them, one last time. "Oh, and I suppose I should be thanking you."

El looks up at Mike, the look of confusion on his face mirroring the one she can feel morphing her own features. "What do you mean, Mr. Russell?" El asks as they both turn to look back.

"You two just won me 50 bucks. There was a pool going around, about when you two would get together," Mr. Russell says, grinning widely, shoulders shaking with barely suppressed laughter.

El looks back at Mike, unsure if she should laugh as well or get angry, but she settles for amused when she sees how Mike's trying to hold back an exasperated grin. "Um, you're welcome?" Mike says, eyebrow arching.

But El's about to lose the hold she has on her amusement, so she grabs Mike by the elbow and gives Mr. Russell one last smile. "Enjoy your winnings, Mr. Russell," she says before she opens the door and all but drags Mike out of the office.

They make it out to the hallway before El lets go and starts giggling, a heady combination of amusement and relief rushing through her. "Oh my god, they were *betting* on us!" El practically gasps out.

"Ok, it isn't *that* funny," Mike says as he guides her towards her office.

Her giggles calm as she feels the comforting and thrilling heat of Mike's palm through the thin fabric of her shirt. "Oh, it's totally that funny," El says. "We should have asked him for a cut of the winnings."

They reach her office, the open door just next to them, and turn to look at each other. Mike's looking down at her, exasperation fading into his own resigned amusement. "What am I going to do with you?"

El can't help the way she grins. "You want to have that conversation after we just got chastised for making out in my office?"

Mike takes a moment to consider. "Alright, fair point," he says a beat later. He grins. "C'mere." He reaches for her, pulling her towards him so he can wrap his arms around her. El sinks easily into Mike's embrace, her palms resting lightly against his chest, fingers curling just so into the fabric of his sweater, while he holds her tight against him. She feels him breathe as he rests his chin against the top of her head, the curve of her head tucking easily beneath his jaw. "We're not fired."

El shakes her head and snuggles in deeper, breathing him in. "We're not fired," she echoes. She moves her hands so she can hug him back briefly before she pulls away enough to look up at him. Mike's smiling down at her, fond and gentle, and El's heart swells with emotion. She does a quick check up and down the hall before she pushes up onto her toes, tugging Mike down by the sweater at the same time. Mike gets the hint and leans over so his lips can meet hers in a soft, lingering kiss. Oh, to be sure, there's passion and heat swirling beneath the surface, like there always is, but this kiss is primarily soothing, *loving*, and El's heart just *soars*.

She takes in a deep breath, the roller coaster of the last 10 minutes leaving her behind and making her feel a little shaky, before she pulls away, her lips leaving Mike's slowly. She can still feel the tingling on her lips from his mouth as she opens her eyes and looks up at him. "Did you want to grab your lunch and hole up in my office?"

El's wearing her hair up in a loose bun, but it doesn't stop Mike from tucking stray strands behind her ear, his fingers brushing lightly against her hair. "Sounds good," he says, gaze dancing about her

face, awe shining in his eyes. He leans over once more, but this time it's to press a cute kiss to her nose. "I'll be right back."

El scrunches up her nose, smiling all the while, and giggles as she watches Mike walk away, his steps quick and eager, like he's counting down the seconds until he can see her again. Just like she's doing with him.

Three more days, she thinks as she turns to head into her office to grab her lunch out of her bag and get settled in to spend time alone with Mike (even if the 45 minutes they'll get isn't enough, is never going to be enough).

Three days until he takes her out to dinner, until he takes her out on that first date that will be the *real* start of everything.

El just has to make it until then, first.

How in the *fuck* is he going to make it the rest of the week?

Because Mike's *exhausted* and it's only Wednesday.

Part of it, for sure, is the looks and the giggles and the sly comments from his students about his relationship with El. The rumors are still flying around, though they're getting tamer and closer to reflecting reality than the fanciful version of what Mike and El were doing when they got caught by Ophelia.

But it still wears on him, being talked about behind his back, trying his best to ignore the giggles and whispers. It's like he's a teenager again in the worst way, memories of being bullied and teased worming their way up from his subconscious. It takes a lot of energy to push past it and remind himself that his students are only acting this way because he's with El, because he's *dating* El.

So, really, despite how annoying and exhausting it is, Mike knows he can put up with the teasing and the whispers and the looks because he gets to be with El and that's what really matters. He just *really*

wishes they would stop with it already.

Besides, it's only a tiny part of the exhaustion weighing him down.

The vast majority of it is the near all-nighters he's been pulling to get this stupid screenplay done. For the past couple of nights, he's been going to bed anywhere between 2 and 3 in the morning, only to wake up at 6 to get ready for work. Mike might have been able to get away with it if he were younger - he *did* get away with it back in his college days when he used to pull all-nighters to study for finals or write papers - but he's only a year and change away from turning 30 and his ability to get by on less than a handful of hours of sleep is long gone.

So, by Wednesday, Mike feels like he could just fall asleep standing up. His stomach feels gross - something about not getting enough sleep makes him feel almost constantly nauseated - and all he wants to do is crawl into bed. But he has finals to prepare for, students to teach, a screenplay to write, and social obligations that need to be fulfilled. *No rest for the wicked, it seems.*

Mike's hoping that he'll be able to finish this screenplay up by tomorrow night. And he's actually pretty sure he'll be able to. He's down to the final quarter or so and he figures that he can wrap it up tonight, with tomorrow being just giving it an overview, tightening up loose ends, and smoothing over the transitions. Luck willing, he'll be able to get a full night's sleep Thursday and will wake up on Friday rested and rejuvenated so he can take El out to dinner that night and not fall asleep halfway through the meal.

Still, it says something about how tired he is when El remarks on it when he sees her that morning, in the 20 minutes before the first block starts. It's become part of his morning routine, getting to spend this time with her, and Mike hopes that, someday, she'll be a crucial part of every moment of his routine - waking up next to her, showering and getting ready for work together, both of them moving around the kitchen as they make breakfast and coffee, driving to work with hands clasped over the center console - god, he wants that so bad he can taste it.

"You look tired," El says softly when she sees him that morning after

they've said their hellos, greeting each other with a kiss that wakes Mike up as well as warms him from within. One of her hands reaches up and traces the bags underneath his eyes with her finger, one and then the next. "Burning the candle at both ends?"

Mike gives her a humorless grin. "Yeah, was up until almost 3 in the morning trying to get more of this screenplay done."

El frowns, sympathy etched into every line on her face, and Mike's heart squeezes softly at how much she cares. "You're working awfully hard on this. Is it really important to be done with it by Friday? I'm just worried about you burning yourself out."

Overwhelming affection rolls through Mike, spreading out from the center of his chest, and he can't help it as he reaches for her again, pulling her towards him so he can hold her, arms wrapping around her frame. El hugs him back, pressing herself against him tightly, as her hands clutch at his back. Mike *loves* the feel of holding her, of the way her body fits against his, sweet and soft and just so fucking perfect, like they're matching puzzle pieces that have waited 28 years to find each other.

They stand there in her office, neither of them speaking, the distant sounds of the students moving through the halls reaching their ears with its quiet din. "I'll be ok," Mike says after a moment, reveling in the feel of El in his arms, in the feel of her warmth pressed against him, marveling that he *can* experience these things. "I said I'd do it, though, and I'm not about to break my word."

"Promises, promises," El sighs, voice tinged with gentle amusement. "Everyone's so obsessed with *promises*."

Mike grins. "That sounds ominous."

El giggles. "You just remind me of a couple of friends of mine, that's all," she says cryptically before she pulls back. "You going to be ok to teach today? Not going to fall asleep mid-lecture, are you?"

Mike shrugs as he looks down at her. "Hopefully," he says. "I mean, this isn't my first time teaching any of this material and I have my lesson plans down pat. So I'll be fine."

El smiles up at him and leans up to give him another kiss. “Good,” she says after she pulls back just enough to speak. “Though I’m still going to worry about you.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything less,” Mike says with a chuckle.

The day passes not as bad as El fears, but not as well as Mike is hoping for. He’s tired and jittery from all the coffee required to keep him upright, and it feels like everything’s foggy and a little muffled. He gets a little relief from the exhaustion that pulls at him during lunch and his free block after, where El lets him curl up on the couch in her office to take a nap, his head pillowled on her lap while her arm wraps around him as she reads through student files.

The nearly 90 minute nap leaves him feeling like a new person and the cup of coffee from the break room just after clears the remaining fog of sleep from his brain and lets him make it through the rest of the afternoon with something very close to his normal amount of energy.

Mike wonders how long this burst of energy is going to last, but hopefully it at least carries him through dinner at Dustin and Megan’s. After that, he can grab some more coffee and power through the rest of the screenplay once he’s home.

But, before he does any of that, once the school day is over, Mike goes over to El’s office to see her one last time before he leaves campus for the day, walk her to her car and give her a goodbye kiss.

Only, when he gets there, minutes after the last bell of the day has rung, El’s coat is still hanging on the coat rack, her purse still slung over the back of her chair, and she’s standing in front of her desk, arranging papers on a clipboard, pen clenched on one hand.

Brow furrowing, Mike steps into her office. “Hey, you sticking around campus?”

El turns around, a bright smile on her face. “Why, hello there!” she says as she practically *bounces* over to him.

Mike reaches for her, distracted from his question by her sheer

enthusiasm and overwhelming beauty, and lets himself get lost when she leans up to kiss him, her lips soft where they meet his, her kisses light and sparkling and just heart-poundingly amazing. “Hi,” he says, breathlessly amused when El pulls away. “You’re in a good mood.”

El smiles up at him and reaches up for him, arms wrapping around him with her hands clasped behind his neck, her fingers drawing light patterns against the skin just above the collar of his shirt. “It’s been a good day and I have a pretty exciting evening ahead of me.”

Mike smiles. “Does this have something to do with why you’re sticking around school for a while? Which is *why*, again?”

“Spring musical auditions are in about 10 minutes,” El says.

Memory rushes in and Mike lets out a sigh at the realization. “Oh, yeah, that’s right, you were telling me about that yesterday. Judging how well the students can dance?”

“Pretty much,” El says. “Part of the audition process is me briefly teaching everyone steps to a simple routine and seeing how well they can pick it up, how well they recover from mistakes. It’s going to be important for them to be able to do both since we don’t have a lot of time to teach everyone how to dance.”

“Fair enough,” Mike says.

“And then I’m going to hang out with some friends for dinner,” El says and there’s a mischievous sparkle in her eyes that makes Mike intensely curious.

“You look like you’re planning something,” Mike says, his voice playful and teasing.

“Maybe,” El says, grinning. “But I don’t want to jinx it, so I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“Promises, promises,” Mike teases.

“You like my promises, though,” El says, looking up at him knowingly, biting her lip to try and contain her smile, but it breaks free anyway and Mike falls even more in love with her at the playful

look on her face, tinged with flirtatious heat.

“Hmm, I really do,” Mike says as he leans in once more to kiss her. This kiss is slower, deeper, filled with the kind of passion and promise that makes his heart race in his chest and steals the breath from his lungs. El’s hands shift against him, one hand coming up to comb through his hair while the other clutches at his bicep. Mike pulls El even closer against him, his hands splaying across her back, fingers caressing her through the fabric of her blouse, the heel of one of his hands nestled against the small of her back.

God, he loves this. He loves how easily they get caught up in each other, in how each time he kisses her always feels a little bit like the first time, excitement zipping across every nerve with fluttering hearts and gasping breaths. He could do this every day for the rest of his life and, god willing, that’s exactly what’s going to happen.

They both pull away after a little bit, albeit quiet reluctantly. Since getting all but reprimanded by Mr. Russell, Mike’s hyper-aware of being mindful that they can’t get too carried away on campus, but it still doesn’t mean Mike ever wants to stop kissing her.

Mike looks down at her, taking in El’s flushed cheeks and glistening lips and eyes that are heavy with desire and, god, he just wants to kiss her again. “Walk me to the auditorium?” El asks, sounding just as breathless as Mike feels and he’s so fucking happy she’s as affected by him as he is by her.

“Of course,” he says, feeling like the luckiest man on the face of the planet.

They hold hands the entire time on the way over, fingers laced together, and nothing in Mike’s life has ever felt as right as the feeling of her hand in his. El kisses him goodbye one last time before she heads inside, lips lingering against his, leaving Mike with promises that she’ll see him tomorrow.

And with El gone, locked away to help facilitate auditions for the musical, Mike gathers his things and heads out. He fills his time before heading over to Dustin’s by running a couple of errands he’s long overdue for, mainly going grocery shopping since the state of his

refrigerator and pantry is just pathetic. And maybe, once he's done with that, he's hoping he can quickly review his work from yesterday on the screenplay before he has to leave.

Only, that last part doesn't happen. The errands take Mike a little longer than he initially thinks on the outset and by the time he's finished putting away the things he's bought, it's time for him to head over to Dustin's place - no time to go over the screenplay. Mike feels his anxiety ratchet up another notch or two as he quickly changes clothes and heads out the door, dressing down compared to the slacks and button-down he wears for work. Not having that time for review just means it's one more thing he has to do once he's home for the night and he feels the pressure of the clock ticking down, weighing heavily on his shoulders like an anchor wrapped around his neck.

It doesn't take long to get over to Dustin's apartment, but the entire time, Mike's brain is thinking about the work he needs to do on the screenplay. He knows he's going to have to leave within about an hour or so and it's not just because he's highly anxious about this - he honestly still has *so much* work left to do.

So it's a good thing he gets there on time for a change, knocking on the door to Dustin's apartment a couple of minutes before 6.

Megan answers the door and when her gaze lands on him, she blinks a couple of times in quick suggestion, like she's surprised to see him. "Mike! You're, um...."

"On time?" Mike finishes, grinning, the expression a little wry. He knows he has a penchant for always being the last to arrive, and given the surprise on Megan's face, Mike feels it's safe to assume he's the first one here.

But before Megan can say anything, Dustin's voice calls out from somewhere further in the apartment. "Hey babe, is that Janie and Max?"

Megan steps aside so Mike can enter the apartment just as Dustin comes out from the hallway that leads back to the bedrooms. "Holy shit," Dustin says as he sees Mike, jaw dropping in shock. "Have I entered the Twilight Zone, or something? Or is Michael Wheeler

actually on time for something?”

“Oh, ha, ha,” Mike says as he takes off his winter coat, hanging it on the rack by the door. “I can’t stay more than an hour, so I made extra sure to be here on time. Is that a crime?”

Dustin grins. “No, just unusual.”

“Well, it’s nice to have you over, Mike,” Megan says, reaching up to hug him and press a soft kiss to his cheek in greeting. “I’m going to finish up a few things in the kitchen..”

“You need any help?” Mike asks as he pulls away from the hug, looking around the apartment for *something* he can do. Everything’s clean and tidy, nicely decorated for an evening in with friends, and the smells of cooking wafting through the apartment are practically mouth-watering.

“Nope!” Megan says, smiling. “I’m just finishing warming up the food I made last night. Everything’s buffet style and really informal, so we’re just going to eat in the living room and stuff. But, thanks, though!”

With that, Megan disappears back into the kitchen, leaving Mike and Dustin alone near the front door. “Ok,” Mike says. “You mind telling me what’s going on?”

Dustin smiles, looking way too innocent to be real. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Mike levels a look over at Dustin. “Please, how long have I known you? I can always tell when you’re up to something.”

“Just a little bit of matchmaking between friends,” Dustin says with a wink.

It takes Mike a second to work through the implications. “You trying to set Lucas up with someone?” he asks, a smile slowly pulling up the corners of his mouth.

“Yeah, something like that,” Dustin says, grin widening. “You’ll see, I promise.” He pauses, grin turning into a small frown. “Unless you

leave before everything starts. Hey, why *do* you need to leave early, anyway?”

Mike feels his cheeks warm a little as he realizes that he hasn’t told his friends about the screenplay. El’s the only person he’s actually told and it makes him feel like a horrible friend, that he hasn’t shared the news with the people who’ve been in his life since almost before he can remember. “So, uh, you know that movie deal?”

Dustin’s eyes light up in remembrance. “Oh yeah, the one that’s going to make you filthy rich?”

Despite the embarrassment of feeling like he’s crowing over his own achievements, Mike rolls his eyes. “Yes Dustin, *that* one. Well, I, uh, met with the movie studio executives last week and they, uh...they want me to do the first draft of the screenplay.”

Dustin’s mouth drops open in surprise and his face lights up. “Holy shit, man, that’s awesome! You gonna get credited for it?”

“Yeah, plus they want me to be one of the executive producers,” Mike says, smiling. “But they want a first draft of the screenplay by Friday afternoon, so I’ve been pulling long-ass nights every night this week trying to get it done. I still have a bunch more work to do, too.”

Dustin frowns again, brow furrowing. “Well, hey, if you need to, you can head home right now. I’ll tell the others you have work; they’ll understand.”

Mike shrugs, heart warming with Dustin’s concern, and he reaches out to tap his fist against Dustin’s bicep. “Nah, man, it’s ok. I *do* need to eat dinner at some point, you know? But thanks, though.”

“Fair enough, man,” Dustin says, a small smile playing at the curve of his mouth.

“Besides, I knew you were up to something when you called to invite me so I *had* to come to see how badly whatever you were planning was going to crash and burn.”

“Hey!” Dustin says, jabbing a finger at Mike. “My plans are gold. And this is gonna work. Janie and I put a lot of thought into this.”

Mike's eyebrows raise until he feels like they're practically going to merge with his hairline. "Janie's helping you? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?" Honestly, Mike has no clue either way, considering he's never *met* Janie, but he can't help but think that Dustin teaming up with *anyone* who would willingly do so is a bad idea all around.

Dustin rolls his eyes. "Look if you're going to give me shit, I need a beer first. You want?"

"Couldn't hurt," Mike says. "When's everyone else supposed to get here, anyway?"

"Well, soon," Dustin says as he grabs a beer out of a cooler set up in the living room, opening it before handing it over to Mike. "Janie said she wouldn't be able to be here until about 6:30ish or so, and she's bringing Max with her."

"Max?" Mike asks, confused. Is this that guy she's seeing?

"Yeah, Janie's friend, the woman we're trying to set up Lucas with."

For a moment, Mike frowns, memory tugging at him. *Wait, doesn't El also have a female friend named Max? Huh, interesting. Man, it'd be pretty cool if they had the same friend, or something, though.*

Mike dismisses the thought almost immediately, chiding himself for creating patterns where none exist - Chicago *is* a huge city, after all, with millions of people - the odds are astronomical, really, that both Maxs are the same person. "Is Lucas aware that he's being set up?" Mike asks before he takes a sip of his beer.

"Nope," Dustin says, popping the 'p'. "But he should be thrilled considering he couldn't stop drooling over Max when we ran into Janie a few nights ago."

"And this Max person? She'll be ok with it, too?"

Dustin shrugs. "That's what Janie says. And since it's her friend we're talking about, I'm inclined to believe her on this one."

Mike smirks. "And, yet, somehow, I can't help but feel like this is going to crash and burn."

The sound of someone knocking on the door interrupts Dustin before he can respond. “It’s not going to crash and burn,” Dustin says as he goes to answer the door, revealing Will and Greg on the other side. “Will! Tell Mike my plans don’t crash and burn.”

“They always crash and burn,” Will says without missing a beat. “Wait, what plan?”

Dustin gasps, almost wounded, as Will and Greg step into the apartment, closing the door behind them. “Will, I’m hurt you would say such a thing!”

Mike laughs. “Dustin and your sister are trying to set Lucas up with one of her friends.”

Will rolls his eyes as he shudders. “God, the fact that the two of you are friends gives me nightmares,” he says to Dustin before he practically does a double take in Mike’s direction. “Wait, what? Holy shit, Michael Wheeler is on time to something?” He turns to Greg. “Honey, pinch me, I must be dreaming.”

“You know what? Fuck you, Byers,” Mike says, giving Will the finger.

Will grins, all shit-eating and mischievous. “Aww, I didn’t think you swung that way, Mikey.”

Mike returns the grin, practically smirking. “Not for you, I don’t.”

Beers are handed out as the teasing continues, Greg jumping into the fray just as well as anyone from the Party, and Lucas shows up right when Megan is bringing out food to the table set up near the dining room. Nobody waits for Janie and Max to get there as they start eating (not that Lucas knows Janie is bringing someone else - “It’s a surprise,” Dustin warns everyone before Lucas gets there).

Time ticks by and it gets to be almost 7 with no sign of Janie and her friend. Will sighs, frowning a bit. “I’m going to call her, see what’s holding her up. She had a work thing tonight, so it may have gone late. Be right back.” Will slips away to one of the bedrooms to make the call and Mike turns to Dustin from where he’s sitting on one of the couches in the living room.

Dustin notices the movement and turns to look back. “You need to get going?”

Mike cringes, especially when Lucas gives him a look, all “go figure” disappointed. “Yeah, in a little bit. Probably in the next 10 minutes.” Mike can’t lie, he’s disappointed, too. He was really hoping to *finally* meet Janie and, unless she shows up in the next 10 minutes, that’ll be another “shoulda, coulda, woulda” moment. Plus, Mike really wanted to see this plan of Dustin’s come to fruition.

“Got a hot date?” Lucas asks, lips twisted in humorless grin.

Mike opens his mouth to answer, but Dustin jumps in before Mike can speak. “Actually, our own little Mikey here is going to be a movie writer! So proud, you’ve grown up into a fine young man.”

Dustin reaches out to pinch Mike’s cheek and Mike swats his hand away. “Dude, not fucking funny,” he says before he looks over at Lucas. “Yeah, the movie studio asked me to do the first draft of the screenplay and they want it by Friday. So I’m under a tight deadline.”

Lucas cringes and looks contrite. “Ouch, sorry man.”

Mike shrugs. “It’s ok. Trust me, if I didn’t have to leave, I wouldn’t. But I have a lot of work left to do and not much time to do it in.”

“No, I get it. This sounds pretty important.”

Mike grins. “Hey, if it’s any consolation, if I *did* have a hot date, I’d still ditch you guys for it.”

Lucas rolls his eyes, but he’s grinning, just as amused. “Naturally.”

Will steps back out into the living room with an exasperated look on his face. “She’s running late, but she should be here in about 20 minutes or so.”

Dustin looks over at Mike, eyebrows pitched curiously. “Could you wait 20 minutes?”

Mike cringes, anxiety rising inside of him, making his skin prickle uncomfortably, and he sighs. “No, I don’t think so. I just...I have too

much to do.”

“Wait, what’s going on?” Will asks.

“Mike has work to do,” Dustin says. “I’ll explain in a bit.” He turns back to Mike. “So, you taking off?”

Mike drains the last of his beer from the bottle and stands. “Yeah, I think I am. Tell Janie I’m sorry? I’m not avoiding her, I swear.”

“Yeah, we’ll tell her,” Lucas says. “Go, be productive.”

“Right, will do.”

Mike says his goodbyes, through hugs and elaborate handshakes, and, at 10 after 7, Mike steps out onto the sidewalk in front of Dustin’s apartment building, huddling up against the cold that bites at his skin as he makes his way to his car parked around the corner.

And, if he would turn around to look behind him just as he approaches the corner, he would see El with her red-headed friend as they approach from the opposite end of the block, making a beeline for the door to Dustin’s apartment building.

But, he doesn’t do that.

So, he keeps walking.

Completely unaware.

Jesus fucking Christ, it’s like she’s possessed or something. “Holy shit, El! *Slow down.*” Max has barely locked her car where it’s parked around the block from the entrance to the building where El’s friend lives and El’s already almost halfway to the corner.

El stops and turns around, arms hugged tight around her chest, which looks ridiculous given the bulky winter coat she’s wearing. “But it’s freezing and we’re already late.”

Max snorts. “Yeah, but neither of those are good reasons to risk breaking our necks when we slip on the icy sidewalks, is it?” She makes her way over to El at a more sedate pace, feeling the crunch and slide of the ice beneath her feet, and links arms with El when she’s close enough so they can start walking. “Look, I know, you hate being late, but it’s not your fault your work thing ran over. If your friends are really your friends, they’ll understand.”

“Stupid auditions,” El grumbles as they round the corner. “Why do I sign up for these things?”

Max nudges El in the side with her elbow. “Aww, I thought you liked helping out at your school?”

El puffs out a harsh sigh, conceding. “I do, you’re right,” El says. “It’s just that....” She trails off and Max looks over to see El giving her a slightly panicked look.

Max fights to keep from rolling her eyes. She knows that face. El’s *up* to something. And, if Max were a betting woman - which she *totally* is, if the way she cleaned house during weekly poker nights back in college are anything to go by - she’d say El is plotting something, something that has to do with her really cute friend from last Friday night.

Lucas, Max’s brain whispers in reminder and a warm shiver runs down her spine. *God*, he was cute - tall and fit with graceful hands and gorgeous eyes and lips that she *desperately* wants to feel against hers. And he thought her taste in movies was cool...or, at least, that’s what Max is assuming from his whole “the Mad Max movies are cool” bit. Max very much wants to see what else they might have in common, if they’re at all compatible.

And yet, every time she has the thought, a frisson of fear runs down her spine at the idea of putting herself out there. What happen if she opens up and gets hurt? Max isn’t as strong as El, able to pick up and start over in the same way. No, her heart is a lot more fragile, *brittle*. It’s why she’s so prickly, so brash, she thinks. The fewer people she lets in, the more she drives away, the harder it will be for her get hurt.

Which really sucks when a significant portion of her is crying out with how *lonely* she is. Max hadn't lied to El when she told her that she was lonely, that it was hard watching El go through this amazing, almost storybook romance and *not* want something similar, to think that maybe putting herself out there was worth it if that's what she got in return. Max has to admit she's a lot more open to trying to find someone. Hell, she even signed up for online dating, for Christ's sake.

Still doesn't mean I like her meddling in my non-existent love life, Max thinks. Still, Max loves El anyway and is touched that El would want to do something to try and make her happy, even if it makes Max want to roll her eyes and slink back to her apartment with a pizza and couple of beers, snuggled up on the couch under her blanket while she watches Netflix, safe and calm...

...And absolutely tired of being alone.

Really, that's why Max agreed to come to this sham of a "last minute dinner" - Max may know what El is up to, but she's willing to at least dip her toe into the romance waters, see what happens.

"Yeah, I know," Max says. "You just hate being late." Max glances over, eyeing El while a grin plays at her lips. "I know what you're doing, by the way."

El straightens, shoulders pulling back while she looks over at Max with a prim sniff, eyebrows arched almost *scandalously*. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she says breezily.

Max can't help it: she giggles. "Uh-huh, sure. You keep playing that game." She sighs as they reach the front door of the building. "So, tell me about who's going to be here tonight? I literally don't know any of these people."

"Which is why I'm inviting you," El says pointedly. "These people are the other part of my family and it's high time you guys all met."

Max watches as El presses the call button for the elevator inside the small lobby. "So, give me the rundown on the who's who of Hawkins, Indiana."

Max tries not to laugh at the flat look El gives her, but fails miserably. “Alright, well, there’s my step-brother Will - I call him Billy because he calls me Janie, just warning you that it’s a thing we do - with his partner, Greg. And then there’s Megan and Dustin, who’s apartment we’re at. And then just Lucas.” El pauses, blinking like something hit her upside the head. “Oh, and Mike.”

Max’s eyebrows arch up high onto her forehead. “Wait, your boyfriend Mike?”

El lets out a scoffing laugh, like the idea is just preposterous. “No, not *my* Mike. *This* Mike is best friends with the boys - they all grew up together before he moved away. I’ve never actually met him, funnily enough. Tonight will be the first time, but I’m sure he’s just as nerdy and annoying as the rest of the boys.”

“There sure are a lot of Mikes in your life, aren’t there?” Max says with a shake of her head

El rolls her eyes as they enter the elevator. “God, you have no idea. There’s two Michaels at work; like, *three* at the dance company I’m with; and, I *swear*, there’s a good chunk of the male students who are *also* named Mike. And then the 4th, mysterious member of the Party, so, *yeah* - a *lot* of Mikes. Too many, actually,” she says as she presses the button

The elevator starts to rise. “Gee, it’s like it’s one of the most common names for boys or something,” Max says, grinning at the sheer exasperation emanating from El.

“Fucking seriously.”

There’s a beat of silence before something else El said niggles at Max’s mind. “Wait, the Party? What’s that?”

El giggles as she starts unbuttoning her coat, the warmth of the upper floors bleeding into the small elevator as it carries them up several floors. “Oh god, my brother and his friends used to play Dungeons and Dragons when they were kids and they started calling themselves ‘The Party’ because of it. They still do to this day.”

Max doesn't know if she thinks that's hilarious or adorable or some combination of both. But she giggles anyway. "Oh my god that's... wow."

El grins, but Max can see it's a fond expression. "I know, right? Adorably and completely nerdy."

"Totally," Max says with a shake of her head.

A few moments later and Max stands off to the side while El knocks on a nondescript apartment door. There's maybe 5 seconds before it swings open, a man with curly hair and a wide grin greeting them. "Janie! You made it!"

"Hi, Dusty," El says reaching out for a hug.

"And Max, right? Nice to see you again," Dustin says as he lets both of them in. Thankfully, he doesn't try to hug Max like he did El.

"Nice to see you again, too," Max says. "And thanks for inviting me over."

"Well, any friend of Janie's is a friend of ours," Dustin says, closing the door behind them. "Here, you can hang up your coats here by the door. Did you guys want something to drink?"

"Please tell me you have wine," El says, something akin to desperation etched on her face.

"In the kitchen, waiting just for you," Dustin says.

El practically sighs with relief. "Oh, good, be right back."

El shuffles off and Max looks deeper into the apartment, feeling a little awkward as a small crowd of people she doesn't know stares back at her, questioningly in the case of a shorter guy with medium brown hair and the tall blond snuggled up next to him, and almost alarmed in the case of Lucas, who Max recognizes immediately by the way her heart starts pounding in her chest. *God, he's still just as cute as she remembers.*

"You want a beer?" Dustin asks Max. "Or is wine more your speed?"

Max blinks, clearing her thoughts, as she looks back at Dustin. “Oh, um, no, beer’s fine - I prefer it, actually.”

Dustin grins. “Good, you’ll fit right in with the rest of us. El and Megan are the two odd ones out.”

“Hey, I love wine,” the shorter guy with brown hair says. He looks at Max and stands, waving a hand. “Hi, I’m Will.”

Max narrows her eyes, trying to remember. “You’re...El’s step-brother, right?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” Will says. “And this cutie next to me is my partner, Greg.”

“Hey, there. Welcome to the madhouse,” Greg says, smiling warmly, waving with a brief lift of her fingers.

Greg’s description makes Max laugh a little. “Hi, nice to meet you,” she says, smiling politely, wishing she felt a little less socially awkward.

“And the grump over there is Lucas, though I’m sure you remember him,” Dustin says as he shows Max where she can sit down. “Lucas, you remember Janie’s friend, right?”

Max looks at Lucas, notices him staring back at her with wide eyes, surprise reflected in the dark brown gaze - *holy shit, he didn’t know she was coming* - and she can’t help the way her heart races as he looks at her once the surprise starts fading: gaze dancing over her body, like he’s trying to memorize the shape of her with his eyes (and making her wish desperately that the jeans she’s wearing were a little tighter or her sweater a little more low-cut). But he smiles after a moment, the expression a little unsure and so very, *very* cute. “Yeah, I remember,” he says with a voice that is deep and a little throaty in a way that makes her shiver.

There’s an empty spot next to him on the loveseat he’s sitting on, only one plate in front of him on the coffee table, and Max hopes she’s not about to make massive assumption. Because she’s about to take the bravest leap of faith she’s ever taken in her life.

She's about to sit next to a cute guy who she's pretty sure might be just as attracted to her in return and it's just about the hardest thing she's ever done.

Max moves before she can think it over too much, before she can talk herself out of it. But her heart is fluttering and her breath feels like it's a little short, regardless, as she looks down at Lucas. "Mind if I sit here?"

For a moment, Lucas can't think, can barely even *breathe*. Max is just about the most beautiful woman he's ever seen in his entire life and she's looking at him with hopeful eyes and a sweet smile, waiting for him to respond.

Answer, you idiot! his brain yells at him.

It's just the jolt of adrenaline he needs and Lucas clears his throat. "Yeah, uh, not at all. All yours."

Max's smile grows even wider, emphasizing her lips in a way that makes Lucas *really* want to know what it would feel like to capture them with his own. "Thanks." She sits, the air around her a fresh breath of something light and floral - a combination of her shampoo and whatever laundry detergent she uses - and it's instantly Lucas' favorite smell in the entire world.

God, she's beautiful, Lucas can't help but think as he looks at her. Fiery red hair, pulled back in a low ponytail; pale, smooth skin dotted with the faintest of freckles; svelte curves covered by the softest looking sweater he's ever seen and jeans that tantalize him with the shape of her.

When Dustin let El in, Max right behind, Lucas couldn't help but feel the shock hit him like a punch to the gut. And when he looked over at Dustin and saw him grinning that shit-eating grin, Lucas *knew* that this had been a set up. Lucas had been prepared to be pissed and surly on his *and* Max's behalf - Dustin has a little problem with things

called "boundaries" and "minding his own business".

But now that Max is sitting next to him, looking away only long enough to thank Dustin as he hands her a beer before looking back over with curious eyes and a soft smile, the expression on her face a little nervous and unsure and an absolute reflection of everything Lucas himself is feeling in this moment, Lucas can't bring himself to be mad.

So, he smiles, hoping for welcoming but feeling more like it's coming across as overwhelmed and awed (neither of which are a lie, not in the slightest). And the way Max blushes a bit, glancing away shyly, makes him feel like he's on top of the world.

El comes back in a moment later, a couple of plates balanced in each hand while Megan trails behind her with a couple of full wine glasses. "Here, Max, I got you a plate," El says, handing the plate over, silverware tucked beneath, before taking a wine glass from Megan's hand. "Hey, where's your Paladin?" El asks, looking around as she finds a place to sit.

"He had to go back to work," Dustin says. "He says he's sorry and that he promises he's not avoiding you."

El grins, the expression wry and almost playfully disbelieving. "Hmm, likely story. And why am I not surprised?"

Lucas laughs, feeling a lot happier than he did 5 minutes ago. *Gee, wonder why?* "Because it seems like the universe never wants the two of you to meet, that's why."

"Honestly, I'm starting to think so," El says with a roll of her eyes.

Dustin smiles and looks back over at Max. "So, Max, Janie's notoriously tight-lipped about her childhood days - probably because there's an absurd amount of blackmail material contained therein. What dirt do you have for us?"

El gasps, looking affronted. "Dustin Henderson, *you little weasel.*"

But Max laughs and Lucas thinks it's the best sound he's ever heard. "Oh, I have stories, all right. Let me tell you about Christmas break,

2nd grade....”

El groans and claps a hand over her eyes. “Oh my god, I hate you.”

“Oh, hush, you love me,” Max shoots right back, without missing a beat, and Lucas can *feel* the years of friendship between the two women, the same as between him and the rest of the Party. It’s nice, Lucas realizes, to know that El has someone like the Party has each other.

Max launches in to her story, having to do with a too-clever-by-half plan to “catch Santa in the act”, El piping in with asides and counterpoints at just the right time in a way that makes Lucas think this isn’t the first time Max has told the story with El in the same room.

The room soon fills with laughter and, the entire time, Lucas is enchanted by the woman sitting next to him. It’s a feeling that just continues to grow as the night wears on, as the conversation ebbs and flows, breaking into smaller streams of side conversations before rejoining back into a raging river of cross talk and happiness.

And so many of those side conversations are just between him and her - finding out about her, telling her about him, bonding over their love of cheesy action movies and hardcore sci-fi, discovering bits and pieces about her that just make him want to know *everything*. The entire time, Max is smiling and laughing and sneaking in piercing and ribald one-liners that leave Lucas *gasping* for breath as he roars with laughter.

By the time the night’s just starting to wrap up, Lucas isn’t enchanted any more. He’s *way* beyond that now.

No, by the end of the night, Lucas is halfway to being in love.

And he’s *never* been more excited.

El couldn’t feel more victorious if she tried.

The entire night while she's at Dustin's, talking and laughing and drinking wine, she has one eye on the loveseat where Max and Lucas are sitting and all the while, she's doing an internal happy dance. The pair spend half the night in private conversation, all adorable and blushing and *flirting* and El fucking loves it. It's all going *way* better than she ever could have hoped for and she had pretty high hopes going into this evening.

El and Megan spend almost all night trading excited, giddy looks, while Dustin looks just as smug as El feels. El is in such an excellent mood, in fact, that she elects to completely and magnanimously ignore the exasperated looks Will gives her every so often, like he *disapproves*. Well, he can just suck it; it's not *her* fault she's such a good matchmaker.

Seriously, I should do this. Have my own dating agency and everything, El thinks as the evening begins to wind down, as the clock gets close to striking 10. If she were more sober, she'd realize just how silly that idea is.

But she's several glasses of wine into the evening, Megan right along side her - "I never have anyone besides you to drink wine with. Who cares that it's Wednesday?" Megan says as she uncorks a second bottle of red wine, and *really*, who is El to turn down more wine? - so the idea of opening her own dating agency sounds *fantastic*.

In fact, I'm gonna tell Mike. He'll think it's a great idea, she thinks, still pretty tipsy. It's way later in the evening and Max has just dropped her off at home, leaving El alone with her almost drunken thoughts.

Just the thought of Mike, though, completely erases everything else El was thinking about, her every molecule filling with *him* and how he makes her feel, her body filling with love and affection and desire all at once. Her heart begins to race, her lips pull up in a dreamy smile, and El's moving upstairs before she's even fully aware of it, not even taking off her winter coat or hat. She needs to see him. *Right now.*

I think a surprise sleepover is in order, El thinks with a bright giggle as she pulls a duffle bag out of her closet. The effect of the alcohol is starting to fade, but El's still pretty tipsy. Not tipsy enough to forget

to pack the right things so she can go to work in the morning, but definitely tipsy enough to assume that Mike's still awake, to not check that he is at almost 10:30 at night (*he will be, but that's besides the point*).

El knows, *remembers*, that Mike's been working on the screenplay, that he's *so close* to finishing it. She also knows he's been pulling late nights, staying up well past midnight, so she just assumes he's doing the same tonight.

He's been working hard. He deserves a reward. The thought makes El blush as she zips up her duffle bag and turns out the lights. The thought doesn't occur to her that Mike might still be working when she gets over there (but, even if it did, she'd just reason that she'll cross that bridge when she gets to it), and El's all smiles as she slowly makes her way downstairs, a little unsteady on her feet. She makes sure to grab her purse and then she's out the door, locking up behind her.

The night air is *freezing*, but with the alcohol in her system and bundled up in her winter gear, El barely feels it.

She goes to grab her car keys, but a crystal clear thought rings loudly in her brain: *you're not sober enough to drive.*

El chews on her lip, keys going back into her purse as she mulls it over. She still really, *really* wants to see Mike, so badly she can practically taste it.

And then it hits her: *she can walk there.*

Mike literally only live a few blocks away. It'd be, at most, a 10 minute walk. And that's not so bad, El figures with a broad smile, spirits picking back up now that she's found a solution to her temporary roadblock.

And so, smile affixed on her face, El sets off for Mike's place, each step bringing her that much closer to seeing him again.

It's a little after 10:30 when the sound of Mike's doorbell ringing pierces through the haze of concentration surrounding him, pulling him from his laptop screen with a concerned and curious frown. He glances down at the clock in the bottom corner of his screen as he stands from his office desk chair. Who in the *hell* is ringing his doorbell at 10:34 at night?

It's been a pretty productive evening until now, so Mike's not *too* annoyed, all things considered. He has probably another hour or so of work to do until he's finished with the first draft of the screenplay (he still wants to give it a good look over tomorrow night, though) and he's so relieved, he could almost cry. And Mike knows that little break he took by going over to Dustin's for dinner, even though he had to leave early, definitely helped with how much progress he's made tonight. It was an hour where he wasn't working or teaching and it gave his brain the mental breathing space needed to gather up the resources for this final push.

Still doesn't help answer *who's* at his door this late, but it does mean he's not as frustrated at the interruption as he could be.

Once Mike got home from Dustin's apartment, he immediately changed into PJ pants and a sweatshirt and got settled in his office chair. His hair is an unholly mess from running his fingers through it on a regular basis out of frustration and he's not wearing any socks, so he pads downstairs barefoot. All in all, he looks like a slob and he feels kind of bad answering the door like this, but whoever's at the door is just going to have to live with it; hell, whoever they are is just lucky he's going to answer the door *at all*.

The doorbell rings again just as Mike steps down on to the first floor and he sighs, the sound tight and annoyed. "Yeah, yeah, I'm coming, hold your horses," he grumbles, cringing a bit as his bare feet walk across the cool, hardwood floor, flipping on lights as he goes so he can see.

He gets to the door, all ready to give the person on the other side his harshest glare. But then he opens it.

And nearly has to do a double take. "El?" Surprise ripples through

Mike and he's smiling even before his brain's fully caught up with what's going on. Suddenly, he's *not at all* frustrated at the interruption.

El smiles up at him, all rosy cheeks and bright, sparkling eyes, looking so very adorable all bundled up in her winter gear. "Hi!" she says. "I knew you'd still be up."

Mike instinctually reaches for El says, pulling her inside and out of the cold. "What are you doing here?" he asks as he shuts the door behind her.

El bounces on her toes, swaying a little as she reaches up for him. "Surprise!" she says, giggling. Her bare hands, which had been stuffed in the pockets of her coat, come up to clasp behind his neck, her fingers cool against the warmth of his skin.

There's a particular sparkle in El's eyes and Mike laughs as he realizes what it is. "Oh my god, you're drunk, aren't you?"

Her face scrunches up as she thinks and it's so adorable, Mike's heart practically implodes as it squeezes hard his chest. "Mmm, maybe?" El says. "An hour ago, definitely. But now I'm just tipsy."

"Uh-huh," Mike says, letting his arms wrap around her through the still-chilled fabric of her coat. He feels something bump against the underside of his forearm and he looks to see that El has a plain, black duffle bag slung over her shoulder. "You going somewhere?" he asks, plucking at the strap of the bag.

El giggles and cards the fingers of one hand through the hair at the back of his head. "Yeah, your bed," she says, winking at him.

A flash of heat rolls through Mike, even as he's rolling his eyes at just how cheesy that was. "Ok, Little Miss Lush," he says. "I have a feeling you're going to be asleep when I'm finally ready to go to bed, though." He has so many questions right now - like, why is she so tipsy right now? And what prompted this surprise sleepover? And why is she so goddamn giddy? - but he knows those questions can wait until the morning, when she's slept off the rest of the alcohol swimming in her veins.

El pouts. “Does this mean I can’t sleep over?”

Mike tightens the hold he has on El, unwilling to let go of her. “Oh, no, you’re not going anywhere,” he says, smiling, feeling almost giddy. “It’s freezing out there and I’m pretty sure you *walked* given how cold you are.” Which is a concerning thought, if he dwells on it too much. He knows she doesn’t live far, but it’s late and just under freezing outside *and* she’s not exactly sober.

But, El’s here now, warm and safe and *staying the night*, so that’s all he really cares about in this very moment.

“Hmm, good. I really don’t want to walk home,” El says. “Was kind of hoping you’d warm me up, instead.” She quirks an eyebrow, suggestive and flirty, all the while biting her lip to contain her smile.

Mike tries not to groan and fails *horribly*. “I think that can be arranged,” he says. His heart skips a couple of thumping beats at the thought of getting to be in bed with her again, even if it’s just to sleep.

El leans against him, head tipping back to look up at him. “You know what else?”

“What?” God, she’s adorable, wearing a winter parka and beanie, face still beautifully flushed and smiling so big that her cheeks dimple.

El pulls him closer as she stretches up onto her toes. “You haven’t kissed me yet.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Mike says, all over-the-top dramatic. “Let me fix that right away.” He leans in the rest of the way and her lips meet his and he’s *gone*. El might still be a little cold from being outside, but her mouth is *hot* against his. She tastes like the wine she must have been drinking and Mike chases the taste, tongue brushing lightly against her lips, beckoning and pleading. Her mouth opens up beneath his and Mike lets one of his hands come up so he can thread his fingers in her hair, holding her head so he can kiss her harder, mouth slanting against hers in a way that has both of them moaning and whimpering.

God, it would be so easy to say *fuck it* right now, to pretend like his screenplay isn't sitting upstairs, all but finished, to give into the temptation El's dangling in front of him, the promise of her mouth one he *desperately* wants to take her up on.

But he does need to finish the screenplay. And El may not be drunk or anything, but she's a little too intoxicated for him not to feel like he wouldn't be taking advantage of her. So, oh so reluctantly, Mike ends the kiss and tries to ignore the little whimper that escapes from El's lips as he does so.

Mike opens his eyes and looks down at El. Her eyes are still closed, the look on her face *enraptured*, lips just barely parted like she's waiting for him to kiss her again. She opens her eyes a moment later and a gasp lodges in his throat at the look in her eyes, dark and needy, warm and lovely. God, he just wants to kiss her again and never, *ever* stop.

"Why'd you stop?" El asks, voice pitching high with breathlessness.

Mike smiles, heart swelling painfully in his chest, his stomach filling with the tingles of a thousand butterflies. "Not because I wanted to, believe me," he says, reaching up to gently pull the beanie off her head, biting back a laugh at the way her hair musses up from the beanie's absence. "But I still have work I need to get done before I go to bed."

El pouts and Mike almost can't resist the desire to lean in and kiss away the expression. "Ok, I guess," she says, sighing heavily. "I'll just wait for you in bed, then."

An excited thrill runs down Mike's spine at the thought of coming into his bedroom and seeing her waiting for him in his bed. "That sounds like a *great* idea." Mike pulls back and reaches down for her hand. "C'mon, let's go upstairs, get you in bed."

Mike tugs on El's hand and she lets him pull her along, guiding her upstairs. With his free hand, he turns off lights as they go, casting the entire downstairs in darkness once more. Mike leads her to his bedroom and pulls her around him so she's standing in the doorway while he stands in the hall. "Right, you get into bed and I'll be there

as soon as I can.”

“How long do you think you’ll be?” El asks, reaching for him, her hand landing on his chest just next to his heart, her touch thrilling even through the thick cotton of his sweatshirt.

Mike presses his hand over hers, keeping her touch close to his heart. “An hour or so?”

“Hmm, that’s a long time,” El says, looking up at him through her lashes, a flirty smile playing at the corner of her lips. “Wanna keep me company while I change?”

Mike closes his eyes, desire rushing through him with powerful, overwhelming heat. His brain goes wild as fantasy after fantasy spins up in his mind’s eye and, for a moment, he lets himself live in the images his brain’s weaving for him.

(watching her as she gets undressed, slowly removing one piece at a time until she’s standing bare before him. the sway of her hips as she walks towards him, hair cascading down her bare shoulders, the way the light bounces off the rise and fall of her naked curves. the seductive curl of her smile as she reaches for him, her skin warm as he reaches back, her mouth meeting his in a kiss that sets him on fire and makes him forget his name.)

Mike gulps and opens his eyes, jaw clenching. “You’re a tease, you know that, right?”

El grins and lets out a light giggle. “I know. Had to try, though.” She takes a half step towards him, reaching up for him once more.

Mike leans in the rest of the way, lips meeting hers in a light kiss. “I’ll be in as soon as I can.”

“I’ll be waiting,” El says with a coquettish smile.

It’s just about the hardest thing Mike’s ever done, turning to go into his office and shutting the door behind him. He’s so goddamn aware that El’s just in the next room, probably getting undressed *right now*, so close it would take only a relative handful of steps to carry him to her where he could touch her and *be* with her.

But he can't, not when he has work to do - not when he's so close to finishing with this screenplay.

So, Mike takes in a few deep breaths, closing his eyes to help him find some measure of calm, and he focuses on his laptop screen with its blinking cursor. The sooner he finishes this up, the sooner he can go be with El, and the thought bolsters him, spurring him on.

A little less than a hour later and Mike is *finished*, the final words of the closing scene writ large on the screen in front of him. He smiles, almost delirious with how *accomplished* he feels right now. He did it. *He fucking did it!*

Granted, he still needs to proofread and do some structural editing.

But it's done and he's never felt more proud of himself in his entire life.

Mike makes sure he saves the file and backs it up - *just in case* - and then he's closing his laptop so he can go to bed, so he can go be with El.

He turns off the lights as he goes and the faint light of his bedroom beckons him as he moves down the hallway.

For a moment, once he gets to his room, Mike just stands in the doorway, drinking in the sight in front of him. The only light on is the light of his bedside table, blanketing the room in soft, warm light, shadows lingering in the corners. And there, lying in the middle of his bed, is El. Her body's half turned towards the door, the blankets pulled up to her waist, revealing the soft gray t-shirt she's wearing, one that Mike *swears* is one of his. *Again.*

Mike bites back a groan at the thought of her once again wearing his clothes as his gaze lands on her face. And, when it does, his heart just *melts*.

El's fast asleep, face relaxed in slumber, lips just barely parted as she breathes in slow, easy breaths. One arm is outstretched, palm facing up, like she's reaching for him, beckoning him, waiting for him to join her.

Mike gulps, overwhelmed by *everything* - by her presence, by how

good she looks here, how well she fits in to all his empty spaces...that he gets to see her like this, *be* with her like this. It's with a shaky breath that Mike steps into his bedroom, hand reaching for his phone in the pocket of his pants. He quickly sets an alarm before he puts his phone down on his nightstand and pulls off his sweatshirt, leaving him in just his PJ pants, the open air of his bedroom cool on his bare chest.

Mike pulls aside the covers on his side of the bed - *holy shit, that means she has a side of the bed, of his bed* - and slides in, careful not to jostle El so he doesn't wake her.

El shifts a bit, body rolling so that she's facing him completely, and Mike can't stop himself from reaching for her. His palm lands on her stomach before sliding around her waist so he can splay his fingers across her lower back, pulling her towards him. El's lips twitch in a sleepy, unconscious smile, and the way she breathes deeply, like she's sighing in relief at his touch, tugs at every heartstring Mike has.

For a moment, Mike just lets himself stare at her, drinking in the curve of her lips, the way her lashes fan against the upper curve of her cheeks, the way her hair lays across the pillows like liquid silk, the curl of her body as she nestles against him, and, somehow, he finds himself falling even more in love with her. She's a marvel, a wonder he has no idea how he got so blessed to have in his life, and he thanks every lucky star he can think of that she's here with him, where he can hold her and look at her and just *be* with her.

After a little bit, though, the exhaustion that pulls at him - that's *been* pulling at him - makes itself known and Mike finds his eyes drooping shut, body relaxing after days of stress and worry and hard work. Reluctantly, he lets go of El long enough so he can reach behind him to turn off the light, drowning them in a darkness that is soft and intimate. When he settles back down, he pulls her even more firmly against him, sighing as her body molds against his, warm and soft in his arms, and he buries his face in her hair, breathing the soft scent of her shampoo, somehow both alluring and relaxing at the same time. El shifts just a little in her sleep, one leg hooking over his to hold him close, the hollow behind her knee fitting neatly against the lower curve of his thigh.

It doesn't take Mike long to fall asleep like this, wrapped up in her, feeling more content than he thinks he's ever been in his entire life. All he knows, as sleep takes over him, is that he wants to experience this every day for the rest of his life.

He hopes, desperately and fervently, that El wants the same.

But, somehow, somewhere deep inside, he knows.

This is just the beginning.

...or so he thinks.

Notes for the Chapter:

Haha, ok, how many of you wanna kill me and are all "WHY DON'T THEY KNOW YET"? Believe me, that's entirely by design. Shit's gonna get real next chapter, y'all (in the most rom-com, completely angst-free way possible), so buckle up. This is gonna be fun....

(Just give me a few weeks to write it...)

10. A Night to Remember

Notes for the Chapter:

So, first of all, *holy shit* I finished another long fic!
Like, I'm stunned.

Writing this fic brought me so much joy during a very dark time in my life and I will always be thankful to it and all of you for being with me, for supporting me and giving me something to look forward to when life wasn't so good and the days seemed dark.

I do want to take a brief moment to give a shout out to my dear Kate (thenewromantics here on AO3, currently @finn-millie on tumblr) for being a very dear friend and letting me flail with you about the joys of writing mileven. Thank you, dear heart, I love you so much!

For those of you who might be interested in what's coming next, pop on down to the notes at the bottom of this chapter to check it out!

Thank you all once again for sticking with me on this crazy, madcap journey. I hope this doesn't let you down after all the months of build up and I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoy writing it.

(I feel like I can't end this without a warning: some pretty, um...*heated* sensuality up ahead. Nothing explicit (because I would *never*), but, uh...yeah. Again, forewarned is forearmed!)

There's a smile on El's face when she wakes up.

It's the same smile that was on her face when she woke up both times earlier during the night - once to get some water to take with a dose of the painkillers in her purse to help with the hangover that started

setting in, and then once more to go to the bathroom.

And this time, like the times before, El's smile is because of one, very special reason.

Because, right now, she's laying, warm and content, in Mike's embrace, his arm wrapped around her holding her close as he spoons her from behind. His body curls into hers, legs tangled with hers, his chest pressed against her back. The sensation invites a whole host of emotions to swell in El's chest - contentment, happiness, *excitement* - and El relishes every one of them.

But there is one crucial difference between waking up this time compared to earlier, one that gives the smile on El's face a little extra *something*.

The previous two time El woke up during the night, Mike had been asleep the whole time, barely stirring as she got out of bed and only making a mostly-asleep happy murmur once she was back in his arms once more.

But he's not sleeping now.

The arm around her is looped low across her hips, hand pressed against her stomach so she can feel the heat of his palm through the fabric of the shirt she borrowed...which just so happens to be the *only* thing she's wearing.

Very convenient given the way his fingers are gently caressing her through the cotton, his touch teasing and thrilling all at the same time. El lets out a sighing moan, all breathy and throaty, and shifts against him, pushing herself further into the curl of his embrace.

And then El feels the whisper of Mike's breath against her ear and it's like her whole body shivers with anticipation.

"Morning," he murmurs with a voice husky with sleep, low and raspy, before he presses a light kiss to her neck, right below her ear, a spot that sends desire rippling down her spine, her stomach swooping with heart-racing intensity.

El gasps, body arching against Mike's, her legs shifting beneath the

blankets. “Mmm, morning,” she returns. She tips her head, stretching her neck to expose the length of it, her skin craving the touch of his lips, and she hopes he gets the hint.

He doesn’t disappoint. The hand not on her stomach slides out from beneath the pillows to move her hair aside before El feels his mouth about halfway down her neck, pressing against her skin with a suckling kiss. She’s starting to breathe faster now, breath racing to keep up with the pounding of her heart, and El can’t help the whimpering moan that escapes from her.

“How are you feeling?” Mike asks, moving his mouth so he can speak the words right in her ear before he lightly nips the skin on the outer shell of her ear. The hand holding her, meanwhile, has moved so that he’s gripping her hip through the thin cotton, his thumb caressing the back of her hip with maddening, shiver-inducing slowness.

“Pretty good,” El says with a smile. It’s true - there’s only the lingering vestiges of her hangover left in tension around her temples, but it’s fast disappearing, burned out by the desire that builds in her veins. “But I could always stand to feel better.” Her eyes are still closed and she’s almost unwilling to open them. There’s something so thrilling about being able to feel and hear Mike from behind her without being able to see him and she doesn’t want to break the seductive spell that’s woven around them.

Mike breathes out a laugh and the skin of her neck erupts with tiny goosebumps at the feel of his breath along the sensitive skin. “Well, that was the plan,” he says, voice ragged with barely restrained desire. “But *someone* slept through the alarm.” He grips her even tighter, then, pulling her harder against him.

El doesn’t know if she wants to laugh or moan...so she does *both*. “We can be quick,” she says, voice pitching higher as breathlessness overtakes her. She reaches for Mike’s hand on her hip, her fingers weaving with his as her palm presses against the back of his hand. “Especially if you put your mind to it with that talented mouth of yours.”

Mike lets out a low moan as he leans down once more, lips brushing against the corner of her jaw. “Is that what you want?”

El lets out a whimpering cry - god, it amazes her at how quickly he can turn her on, turn her into a creature of need and desire, all with barely there touches and light caresses of his lips. She gulps, trying to draw in a deep breath in order to speak, but when she finally has the voice to do so, her words leave her in a desperate whisper. "I'll take anything you want to give to me," she says, arching against him with a slow press of her hips, moaning as she feels just how much he wants her.

"That's a dangerous proposition, Ms. Hopper," Mike says, pushing back against her. "Are you sure you want to make that offer?"

"Let me show you just how serious I am, Mr. Wheeler," El teases back. She takes Mike's hand, fingers still intertwined, and drags it from her hip, down to her thigh where the hem of the shirt she's wearing is still draped across her, and then up underneath the fabric. She gasps at the feel of his palm on her bare skin and they both moan when his hand touches her naked hip.

"Hmm, *someone* came prepared," Mike says, still teasing, but it sounds a lot more out of control, like he's barely able to hold himself back.

El can't help it: she giggles. "Technically, nobody's *actually* come yet, so...." Mike lets out a snort of incredulous amusement that has El *finally* opening her eyes, turning in his embrace just enough so she can look at him. For a moment, she's struck speechless by the way he's looking at her - eyes dark and needy, lips parted in awe, with hair that's mussed from sleep and looking so luxuriously soft - before she finds her voice again. "But, I'm sure you can fix that, can't you?" *Holy shit*, she can't believe how shamelessly *wanton* she sounds, which Mike can hear if the way he sucks in a sharp breath is anything to go by. And then her tongue flicks out to moisten her lips, an automatic reflex, and she doesn't at all miss the way his gaze drops down to her mouth.

El knows what Mike's going to do the split second before he actually does it, so she feels somewhat (*barely*) prepared when he leans in and kisses her, hard and fast. His mouth is hot against hers and his fingers dig into the flesh of her hip, gripping her so tight she fully expects to see the imprint of his fingers against her skin when she finally has a

chance.

Which she doesn't have *now* as her whole being is swept up in the feel of Mike's mouth on hers as he moves against her, shifting them both so that he's hovering over her, his hips nestled in the cradle of her thighs, her ankles hooking behind his knees. His other hand joins its twin up underneath her shirt, pushing up the article of clothing until they have to break the kiss so they can both pull it up and over her head.

Mike tosses the shirt aside *somewhere* and El doesn't particularly care where - not when she's lying naked beneath him, his bare chest against hers, all warm, soft skin and firm planes, his hands touching her *everywhere*. Her hands aren't still, either, roaming his naked back and his sides, her fingers dipping beneath the elastic waist of his pajama pants. He kisses her again as she begins removing the last of his clothing, hands skirting down his hips and the tops of his thighs, until she lifts her feet up so she can push them the rest of the way with her toes.

They can't stop moaning, either of them, as they trade hot, *deep* kisses, bodies pressed against each other's in almost the exact way they both want, close - *so very close* - to being connected in the way they both craving.

But there's not enough time for that, not enough time for El to finally discover how it feels for their bodies to be fully joined together as they drive each other to the ultimate heights of ecstasy. No, El doesn't want to rush that, doesn't want to rush their first time together.

Soon, her brain whispers. *Tomorrow*.

Tomorrow after their date, tomorrow when he drops her off at her house, El is going to invite him inside...and into *her* bed, where they'll have all night to take their time.

So, for now they'll have to settle for using their mouths and hands to simulate what they *really* want, waiting until there's the time to cross over that threshold.

The next 10 minutes pass by in a haze of passion, desire roaring through her like liquid fire. Everything she is boils down to the feel of his hands on her body, touching her with knowing intent; the caress of his mouth on her skin, lips and tongue driving her wild as he teases her most sensitive areas, pushing her over the edge with his name falling from her lips in a ragged cry; the glide of *his* skin beneath her hands and mouth as she makes him feel the same way until he's boneless and breathless beneath her, making her feel like the most powerful woman in the world.

They're both still trying to catch their breath when El curls up beside him, one leg thrown over his hip, her hand resting on his bare chest. She can feel the racing beat of his heart beneath her palm and El's so glad she's not the only one who's so affected by this whole thing.

Mike's arm wraps around her and he presses a soft kiss to the top of her head, which is pillowied on his shoulder. "We are *way* too good at this," he says, breath leaving him in the shape of a content sigh, a sound which resonates all the way down to her soul.

El giggles and moves her hand so she can wrap her arm around Mike's torso. "God, we are. Just so you know, I'm fully expecting to melt into a puddle when we finally *do* have sex."

Mike returns the giggle with a laugh of his own. "I'm so glad you're talking 'when', not 'if' we have sex."

"Naturally," El says almost breezily. "I find you incredibly irresistible, you know, so it was really only a matter of time."

"And what if I didn't feel the same?" Mike asks, shifting so he can look down at her.

El cranes her neck so she can look back. "Please," she says, teasing smile playing at the corners of her lips. "I'm super hot. How could you resist me?"

Mike's face explodes with amusement, laughter escaping from him. "True," he says. He turns away, reaching over for his phone on the nightstand. "It's 6:30," he says after a second. "We should probably get ready for work."

El presses a soft kiss to his shoulder. “Lead the way to the shower.”

Mike gives her what El can only describe as a giddy smile as he slides out of bed, pulling her behind him as they make their way to the bathroom, both of them completely and unashamedly naked.

Showering with Mike - and really the whole process of getting ready for work together - is just about the most intimate experience of El’s entire life and it’s an experience El wants to have every day until the end of time.

Mike starts the water and immediately turns around so he can take her in his arms once more, maneuvering them until the small of El’s back is pressed against the bathroom counter. She lets out a small gasp as the cold surface of the countertop seeps into her skin, but the warmth of his arms more than makes up for it. “Water takes a bit to warm up,” he says, a playful smile tugging up the corners of his lips. “Old plumbing, very rude.”

El reaches up for him, mirroring his smile as she links her fingers together behind his neck. “Hmm, how *will* we pass the time?”

Mike lifts his hands so he can slide his fingers into her hair, which makes El shiver from sheer pleasure. “How will we, indeed,” he says before he leans down and she stretches up. Their lips meet in a soft, lingering kiss - completely unrushed, the low flame of passion swirling just beneath the surface, all wrapped together with love and affection and the most overwhelming happiness. They kiss like this while they wait for the water to heat up, lips brushing against each other’s with gentle sweetness, both of them content to just exist in this beautiful moment.

The air around them turns steamy - quite literally this time - and they only pull apart so they can both step underneath the running water.

El discovers several important things over the next handful of minutes. The most important of them is that showering with Mike is *amazing* and she loves everything about it. She loves the way the running water makes his skin feel soft and slippery beneath her hands. She loves the glide of *his* hands across her skin as water sluices down her body. She loves the way he helps her wash her hair,

fingers massaging her scalp, and the way he plays with her hair a little as he does so.

Hell, she even loves the way he has to duck beneath the spray from the showerhead to wash his own hair while she giggles at him and reaches up to help work shampoo into his hair. But El especially loves the moments where Mike pulls her against him and just *holds* her, the two of them standing under the running water, steam cocooning them as they stand pressed skin to skin, her head against his chest with his heartbeat in her ear and his hands spread across her back.

They barely speak the entire time they're in the shower, content to just *be*, and she loves how they don't feel the need to fill the silence, that they can just *exist* with each other without pressure or feeling awkward. It's intimate and comforting and El knows that she's going to want to experience this again tomorrow, and then the day after that, and then all the days after that for the rest of her life. And the realization that it looks like she might be able to makes her so happy, she could almost cry.

It's only a little later once they're out of the shower and dressed that Mike and El break the intimate, domestic silence that surrounds them. "You want something to eat?" Mike asks as he enters the kitchen, a couple of steps ahead of El.

Arms laden with the things she brought over, El stops by the kitchen table to organize it all, watching as Mike goes over to the counter where the coffee maker is. "You actually have food now? Is that what I'm hearing you say?"

Mike throws her a look over his shoulder. "Hey, I'm not totally incompetent," he says as he scoops out coffee beans into the grinder. "I *am* able to take care of myself. Managed to go grocery shopping yesterday after work and everything."

El grins as she folds her clothes from yesterday, stuffing them gently into her bag. "Look at you, being an adult."

"Every day for the last 10 years," Mike says.

El zips up her bag and heads over to Mike, wrapping her arms around him from behind, resting the side of her head against his back. “Need any help?”

“You can go to the fridge and pull out what you want and stop pressing your damp hair against my dry shirt,” Mike says, voice raised to be heard over the whirring of the coffee grinder, and he turns around in her embrace.

El sticks her tongue up at him as he looks down at her, smiling teasingly. “Hey, it’s not my fault you don’t have a hair dryer.” Her hair’s still pretty damp from the shower (which is going to suck heavily when she goes out in the frigid temperatures) and she pulled it back in a bun to make it as presentable as possible.

“I’ll fix that for next time,” Mike says, leaning over to give her a kiss as he reaches behind him to stop the coffee grinder. He gives her hip a squeeze with his other hand when he pulls back. “Alright, off to the fridge with you. I’ll finish up the coffee.”

This is how Mike and El end up making breakfast together, moving easily around each other in the small-ish space, dressed for work in slacks and a warm sweater (her) or a button down (him), talking and flirting as they make a quick meal of eggs and toast, eating leaning against the counter while they drink coffee.

“So,” Mike says mid-meal, just after taking a sip of his coffee. “You were in a good mood last night. Have a good dinner with your friends?”

El blushes as she remembers *why* she got kinda drunk last night - celebrating her “success” for Max and Lucas hitting it off - and she feels a little embarrassed at effectively taking credit for something she really has no control over at all. “Yeah, no, it was good, really good,” she says, trying to deflect a bit. She wraps her hands around her mug, tapping on the ceramic with the fingernail of an index finger. “Just...something I helped plan kinda worked and I was in a celebratory mood and my friend opened a second bottle of wine and, well....” El trails off with a shrug. “You know how it goes.”

Mike quirks an eyebrow at her, shoulders shaking with silent

laughter. “Oh, I know how it goes. You’re a cute drunk, by the way.”

El’s blush only intensifies and she feels almost too hot. “Sorry drunk me thought it was a good idea to drop by unannounced.”

Mike gives her a flat, incredulous look and reaches for her. “Nothing to be sorry for,” he says as El goes to him easily, always, *always* willing to be closer. “It was nice knowing you were waiting for me.”

El smiles as she wraps her arms around him, eyes trained on his face, eyebrow quirked knowingly. “I was hoping to do *more* than sleep, but....”

“You were out,” Mike says with a smile, hand coming up to rest lightly against the side of her neck, thumb gently brushing against her jaw and cheek. “Was still nice, regardless.”

El stretches up to give Mike an Eskimo kiss, nose lightly touching his before she follows up with a brief kiss to his lips. “Still sorry for the false promises.”

“Delayed, not false,” Mike says with a grin before his whole face lights up. “Oh, I wanted to tell you: I finished the screenplay last night!”

El smiles so wide, her cheeks almost hurt from the strength of it. “Oh, that’s awesome! You must feel so proud.”

“Not going to lie, it’s a good feeling,” Mike says. “I mean, I still need to proofread and do some editing, but still-”

“You have something to turn in, so to speak,” El finishes. “Still, that’s fantastic, Mike. Let me know if you want any help or anything.”

Smiling, Mike leans over for another kiss. “If I can think of anything, I’ll let you know.” He pulls away enough to look down at his watch. “C’mon, let’s finish up our coffee before heading in to work.”

Mike turns to grab his partially filled mug, but El reaches up with one hand to grab his chin, keeping him faced towards her. It’s an impulsive move, one that takes her a split second to figure out the reason for. She realizes that it’s the easy domesticity of the words he

just spoke, that he's not at all bothered or weirded out by her invasion of his space. "Thank you for letting me be here, for letting me stay," she says, voice hushed with the gravity of the emotion overtaking her.

Mike smiles at her, lips gently curving up. "Well, I wasn't going to kick you out after you *walked* here last night," he says with a quirk of his eyebrow before his face turns fond, his expression softening. "I like having you here. You're welcome whenever you want." He shrugs, looking a little bashful. "I like being with you. I *always* want to be with you."

El stares up at Mike, feeling like the breath has been temporarily stolen from her lungs. Her heart thumps rapidly in her chest, an overwhelmed knocking against her rib cage, and her skin tingles with the beat of a thousand butterfly wings. She wants to tell him the same, that she wants to always be with him too, but her voice has been stolen by whatever stole her breath.

So she does the next best thing.

She kisses him.

It takes Mike a moment to respond, frozen in shock for just a second. But he kisses her back with an intensity that makes El feel like she's *flying*. His lips are sinfully hot against hers and he pulls her towards him, hands gripping her tightly by her hips, until she's fully flush against him. El lets out a faint whimper at the feel of his body hard against hers and she responds by wrapping her arms tight around him. Mike kisses her even harder, his mouth opening above hers, *begging* her to do the same until she responds in kind.

El pours everything she feels, everything she *is* into kissing him. For a moment, she lets it all sweep her away before she realizes how dangerously close she is to letting it carry her away entirely.

With a gasp, El pulls away, just enough so she can speak with a voice that is breathy in how overwhelmed it is. "Sorry," she breathes against Mike's lips, not entirely sure *what* she's sorry for, exactly - for getting carried away, for not returning the sentiment with words, for getting both of them worked up, for *all* of it.

“God, never be sorry,” Mike gets out with a ragged, *wrecked* voice, low and husky in a way that makes her violently shiver, before he kisses her again like he has no intention of ever stopping.

El lets herself fall, if even for just a moment, so she can get lost in the intensity of everything that exists between her and Mike, in the way it feels like she’s never going to be able to get enough of him, not ever, for the rest of her life. She knows they don’t have time for this now - not by a long shot, not when they have work in a relative matter of minutes - but El lets herself ignore the weight of her, of *their* responsibilities, even just for a bit.

They’re both panting when their lips finally break away from each other’s and El opens her eyes to look up at Mike. Her heart skips a beat at the sight of his flushed cheeks and glistening lips and *fuck*, she wishes they didn’t have to stop. “Every time,” she all but whispers. “How does this happen every time?” There’s no need to mention what “this” is; it’s painfully obvious in the way they can’t catch their breath, in how they can’t seem to pull away from each other.

“Does that bother you?” Mike asks, face pinching just barely with concern.

El smiles, incredulous and reassuring all at the same time. “Only when I have to stop. I *hate* having to stop.”

Mike breathes out a sigh, the sound somewhere between amused and relieved. “I hate it, too.” He sighs again, shoulders slumping. “C’mon, we should probably get going. I have lab to set up for this morning.”

El prepares to move away, but she stays for just a second longer. “You’re right, we should,” she says, smiling. “Before we go, though, I just wanted to let you know I’m looking forward to not stopping tomorrow night.”

“Why, whatever are you implying, Ms. Hopper?” Mike asks, a grin stretching up the corners of his mouth.

El winks and reaches up to press a ghost of a kiss across Mike’s lips. “You’ll just have to wait to find out,” she says, all but whispering

once more. Happiness bubbles in inside of her, making her feeling giddy and playfully coy, and she never wants to let this feeling go.

El does let Mike go, however, so they can finish drinking their coffee and get to work, both of them bundling up so they can brave the frigid temperatures outside.

And it's *freezing* outside, but the interior of the car is warm once Mike lets the engine on the car run for a bit and turns on the heated seats. The drive to school is just so nice, too, the car filled with the sounds of their light conversation and Mike holds El's hand the entire way, their fingers clasped together over the center console, his hand warm where it's holding hers. El rests her free hand on his where it's joined with hers, just wanting to keep touching him in whatever way she can.

Mike pulls in to the staff parking lot 20 minutes before the first bell of the day rings and no one's there to give them curious looks as Mike and El walk into the main building together, El with a duffle bag slung over one shoulder, pretty much broadcasting to the entire world that she spent the night at his place.

So, it's with no fanfare and a moment of quiet privacy that Mike drops El off at her office with a soft, lingering kiss and a promise to stop by during the break like he always does. They're all smiles and wistful gazes as they part, El watching Mike go while he keeps looking back at her over his shoulder, unable to fully look away.

And then El's alone once more, but it feels like half of her has disappeared around the corner with Mike, like she's tethered to him in a way she'll never be able to untangle and sever (not that she *wants* to, but still....).

El eases into her day by checking her email, her thoughts still half obsessed with Mike, but she finds her groove by the time she's read and responded to the last email that popped into her inbox overnight. She calls and confirms with Kent that they're still on for her last dance lesson - this time in the dance studio here at St. Ignatius since the studio they've been using is holding a class in the late afternoon/early evening - and the rest of El's morning passes by pretty much just as she's expecting.

Mike pops in during the mid-morning break and they head to the break room to grab some coffee together, talking and flirting the entire time as usual. El pulls him into her office, ducking just out of view of the open doorway to give him a goodbye kiss. Their lips meet each other's over and over again in hot, devouring kisses for about 30 seconds or so before El manages to gather up the will to shoo him out of her office and back to his classroom mere minutes before the bell rings. He leaves her again with a wink and a teasing grin, which just makes El roll her eyes, even as she's smiling and telling him she'll see him for lunch.

The only unusual thing that happens that morning is halfway through the third block, maybe 20 minutes or so after Mike leaves her office to go back to teaching. El's still smiling over the kisses they exchanged only a few feet from where she's sitting, but she's mostly able to gather her concentration and is in the middle of reviewing a student's file when a knock on her open door pulls her from her work.

El looks over and blinks a bit to see Melanie standing in the open door, one hand poised where it was knocking against her door, the other lightly clenched by her side, fingers worrying at the fabric of her uniform skirt. "Hi, Ms. Hopper, do you have a second?"

"Melanie, hi," El says, a little shocked and confused - mostly because, one, El's fairly sure Melanie has class right now and, two, Melanie looks... *nervous*, uncertain, almost scared. "Yes, of course, is everything ok?" This is the first time in days that El's seen Melanie without the rest of the Trio in tow and that also makes El worry.

"Oh, um, yeah," Melanie says, smiling just a bit. "I don't have much time. I ducked out from Ethics to go to the bathroom - we're doing group study review for the final, so I don't have to get back *right* away, or anything. But, I just...." She trails off, cheeks puffing as she lets out a heavy sigh.

"What is it?" El asks, waving the girl in.

Melanie takes a few, tentative steps in and reaches for one of the chairs in front of El's desk. She doesn't sit down; she just rests her hands on the top of the chair, almost leaning against it. "I just

wanted to say I'm sorry. I heard you and Mr. Wheeler got called to the Principal's office."

El arches an eyebrow. "How did you hear that?" she asks, heart thumping heavy in her chest.

"Ronnie Yuan overheard Mrs. Weiss telling Mr. Wheeler that Mr. Russell wanted to see him. And Jack Rosen saw the two of you sitting in the front office right before lunch, so...." Melanie trails off once more, shrugging one shoulder lazily by way of actually finishing her sentence.

"Ah, I see," is all El says, prompting Melanie to continue.

"And, so, yeah, I just wanted to say I'm sorry. We all feel bad - I'm sure you wouldn't have gotten called to Mr. Russell's office if we hadn't been gossiping about you two." Melanie's chewing on her bottom lip now, looking down at the chair in front of her, and El can feel the guilt radiating from the young woman.

"Probably not," El concedes - she's not going to lie to make Melanie feel better; the girl's almost 18 and should be treated like an adult. "But, also, Mr. Wheeler and I should have remembered to keep our personal lives away from work." El immediately feels like a hypocrite for saying this when she and Mike were making out in her office not a half an hour ago. *God, they need to be better about keeping their hands to themselves.*

"Still, I'm sorry," Melanie says. "We just all got excited, you know? Everyone's happy for the two of you."

El can't help the way she smiles, feeling a little bashful. "Yeah?"

Melanie nods eagerly, a bright smile taking over her face. "Yeah, it's like St. Ignatius' own love story, you know?"

El rolls her eyes even as she's blushing. "Ok, enough of that. If you all could keep the gossip about Mr. Wheeler and me to a minimum, we would really appreciate that. Though I'm glad the student body approves of the decisions he and I are making in our *personal* lives," she says, giving Melanie a stern look at the word "personal".

The smile on Melanie's face dims a bit, but she still looks way too happy. "I'll try to keep the gossip down, Ms. Hopper." She glances up at the clock on the wall. "I should get back to class."

"A wonderful idea," El says.

"Right, well, bye, Ms. Hopper," Melanie says, turning to leave the room.

"Goodbye, Melanie."

Only, Melanie pauses once she gets to the doorway, turning back around to look at El with a giddy, teasing smile on her face. "Hey, if you and Mr. Wheeler get married, will you invite everyone from the school? And do you think it'll be before I graduate?"

El bites on the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing incredulously while she gives Melanie an exasperated look that she 100% feels with every fiber of her being. "Keep walking," El says, eyebrow arched with amused warning as she points at the door.

Melanie giggles and waves, flouncing out the door and leaving El alone once more, staring at the door and feeling both incredulous and a little shell-shocked.

After a second, El lets out a laugh, getting back to work with a shake of her head. It's sweet that the students are all rooting for her and Mike - *sweet if a little weird*, El thinks with one last giggle as she refocuses on her work. Also, there's no way she's inviting the students to the wedding when she and Mike get married (yes, *when*, not *if*, thank you very much).

Not a chance.

Mike lets out a sigh of relief when the last bell of the day rings and the students all begin filing out of his classroom. Finals are in just over a week and the entire student body is starting to collectively freak out. Mike can feel the nervousness and anxiety like a physical

blanket draped over everyone and it's starting to make him feel a little antsy, almost like he's about to take a final instead of write one.

So, yeah, Mike can't help but be relieved as the students file out of his classroom and take their worries over finals week with them.

But Mike's also relieved because the end of the day means he can *finally* see El without a time limit attached and *that's* just about the most exciting thing in the history of anything ever.

...Ok, maybe that's hyperbole, but Mike's overall point still stands: it's the end of the day and he can go and spend time El and not feel rushed.

Besides, he has something he wants to ask her, a favor he *desperately* hopes she says yes to. And, if she doesn't have the time, well, Mike's hoping El will at least let him give her a ride home since she came in with him earlier that morning and he figures that her car's probably still parked at home.

There's a giddy smile etched firmly on his face as Mike packs up his things and heads to El's office, his steps quick and, dare he say, *jaunty*. He can't help it, really; he's just so excited to see her again, even though it's only been a couple of hours since he was last in her presence. He just always wants her near, a desire that gets worse every day.

It's *not at all* helped by the fact that El's spent 2 out of the last 4 nights at his house, where Mike's gotten hold her while he's slept and wake up next to her, where he's gotten to be with her physically in almost every way he's dreamed and fantasized about being with her. And added on to that, what's really driving that desire home is how she stayed throughout the rest of the morning earlier today, getting ready to go to work with him - showering together, making breakfast together, all soft smiles and gentle kisses the whole time. El just *fits* so well into any facet of his life and Mike wants her to be part of *all* of them.

So it's no surprise Mike's disappointed when he gets to El's office...

...and discovers that El's office door is closed and locked.

For a second, Mike just frowns at the door. He's not concerned - he's really just *confused*. Did El say something about having plans that he just forgot about? If so, how did she get to them? Did she call a cab, or something?

Mike reaches for his phone to call her, but he stops a second later when a thought hits him.

Wait, maybe she's teaching down in the dance studio. It's really the only other place Mike can think of that El would be on campus. And if she's *not* there, then he'll call her to see what's going on, to make sure everything's ok.

The cold air bites at the exposed skin of his cheeks and nose as he heads for the Arts Building and Mike ducks his face as best he can into his scarf. His jacket is hanging open, the thin fabric of his shirt not enough to keep him warm, but his hands are stuffed in his pockets and he's willing to let his chest bear the brunt of the temperatures as long as he doesn't have to take his hands from his pockets.

All the studios in the Arts Building, be they for dance, visual arts, *or* music, have a set of two doors. One leads directly to outside the building and, given how cold it is outside, Mike's not surprised that all of them are closed tight. The other door in each studio connects to the long hallway that runs straight down the center of the building and Mike heads straight to the double doors that leads to that hallway.

It takes Mike a second to figure out which door leads to El's dance studio, but as he approaches, he knows he wouldn't have needed to guess, given the music that sneaks through the 6-inch gap between the propped-open door and the jamb.

Mike pushes the door open so he can stand in the doorway and, for a moment, he just *stares*, dumbfounded and amused and amazed all at the same time.

His hunch was right - El *is* in the dance studio. Only she's not teaching.

No, El's currently dancing in a way Mike's *never* seen her dance before.

The music that fills the room is bright and happy, pop beats that swing along to an infectious rhythm. The voice that sings along with the music is male, crooning about how he wants to dance with the girl he's singing to. It's a nice song, not that Mike is a fine connoisseur of music or anything, but he's barely paying any attention to the music, not when El is moving along with the beat, her presence filling the room and commanding nothing less than Mike's total and complete captivation.

El moves easily in time with the music, hips shaking and swivelling, arms raised above her head as she spins, head bopping along with the beat, high-heels clacking on the polished surface. It's freewheeling and airy and Mike thinks he can almost make out a pattern in El's steps, but he doesn't know enough about dance to know for sure.

All he knows is that he can't look away. El is magnetic and seductive and she shines so goddamn bright, Mike feels like he's going to go blind just by staring at her. And he marvels, as he always does whenever he looks at her, that she's with *him*, that she lets him be with her, that he can kiss her and hold her and touch her.

(he thinks of them in bed earlier that morning, the feel of her naked body pressed against his, her skin soft beneath his touch, the taste of her exploding on his tongue, his every sense overwhelmed by her and only her as they make each other feel good and his heart begins to beat rapidly in his chest, the low hum of desire racing along his every nerve ending.)

And, again, even as Mike lets himself get lost in how lucky he is that El chooses to be with him, he wonders just *what* she sees in him, *why* she's with him. Mike knows he's not the world's best catch, that there are so many other guys out there who are better looking and more successful and more put-together, so he doesn't understand, sometimes, why El would be with him when there are those kinds of guys out there.

It's not something he ever wants to question too deeply, though, afraid as he is that El will wake up one day and realize how much *better* she could do. So Mike will do the only thing he ever wants to

do: he'll love her and cherish her and treat her with the care and respect she deserves because she's the most amazing woman he's ever met in his entire life. And Mike loves her so much, he almost can't breathe from the force of the feelings that race through him.

El's mid-spin when her eyes land on him and all of Mike's thoughts come to a screeching halt as she smiles, stopping mid-motion. She's wearing the dress she normally wears when she teaches dance and the skirts swirl around her knees and lower thighs as she stands, stock still for just a brief moment. "Mike!"

Mike takes a couple of steps into the room just as El rushes towards him, and he barely reaches out for her in time as El *leaps* at him, jumping up so that her arms are around his neck, her legs around his waist, and looking down at him with a smile that stretches from ear to ear, all bright eyes and breathy giggles and adorable dimples.

Mike's arms wrap around her as he staggers a bit from the force of her weight attached to him, but she's warm where she wraps around him and he can feel the press of her ankles from where they hook behind his back, so he doesn't dare drop her. Happiness fills his chest, bright and shiny and so, so warm, and Mike never wants this feeling to go away. "Hi," Mike says around a laugh, his cheeks starting to hurt with the force of his own smile. "You're in a good mood."

El winks and lets out another tittering giggle. "Dancing makes me happy," she says. One of her hands begins playing with the hair above the nape of his neck and Mike shivers at the touch of her fingers against his scalp and the bare skin of the top of his neck.

"I can see that," Mike says. "What brings you down here? I went looking for you at your office, but it was locked when I got there."

"Dance lessons. For the musical," El says, almost chirping the words.

Memory hits Mike like a ton of bricks. "Oh yeah. But I thought you were doing those somewhere closer to downtown."

"Needed to find another space for today, so I mentioned here. Kent should be here pretty soon."

"Hmm, so there's not much time, is there?" Mike asks. He doesn't even flinch at the mention of the guy giving her dance lessons. One, El told him a couple of days ago that this guy is incredibly gay and, two, it wouldn't matter even if he wasn't because Mike trusts El - she would never lie to him or do anything to hurt him.

El squeezes Mike just that much tighter and her smile turns coy, playful. "Ooh, what did you have in mind?"

All of Mike's plans, his whole reason for coming to see her, completely fades away under the force, the *promise* of her smile. "Just wanted to see you," is what he manages to get out. It's the truth, though - no matter what he actually wanted to ask, the underlying theme behind *all* of it is that he just always wants to see her.

"Aww, so sweet," El coos, eyes twinkling. "I think that earned you a kiss."

Mike's a little surprised he's able to still hold El up, but she's light in his arms and she's bearing a good portion of the strain with how she's clamped around him. "Just one?" he asks, lips twisting in a grin. "No way, that's at least a *two* kiss sentiment."

El leans down and brushes her nose against his. "You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Wheeler, but consider it done." She doesn't even give him a chance to respond before she kisses him. Somehow, and Mike's not sure *how* she manages this, El's mouth is both sweet and sinful against his as she kisses him, teasing him with lush, full lips and the light brush of her tongue.

Mike wraps one arm tighter around her, forearm pressed against the small of her back, his hand curled around her hip, while his other hand trails up her back to cup the back of her head. Her hair's in a bun, but the ties keeping it up have loosened, which gives his fingers enough room to slide into her hair underneath the collected mass. His fingertips drag against her scalp and El lets out a moan, pressing herself to him so tight, he can feel the curve of her breasts mold to his chest just below his collarbones.

Mike's feet are carrying him away from where he's been standing before he's even fully aware of the fact that he's moving, but both

him and El let out bright, giggling moans as he backs her up against the mirrored wall of the dance studio, pressing firmly into her. El arches against him, her knees hugging him close, her calves pressing against the small of his back to pull him closer into the cradle of her thighs, and she kisses him just that much harder.

Mike lets himself get thoroughly lost in *her* - the heat of her body, the promise of her lips, the thrill of her touch. The fabric of her dress is thin and Mike can feel the rapid rise and fall of her ribcage beneath his hand as she breathes heavily against him. He knows he's breathing just as hard, trying to gulp in as much air as possible while they trade deep, devouring kisses, but he still feels short of breath, like all the oxygen in the room has been burned away by the heat he and El are generating. Everything's too hot, having moved from zero to 60 in no time, both of them losing all sense of time and place as they exist only off each other.

Mike moves his hand once more, his palm gliding over her hip and down her thigh. Her bare knee is hooked around his waist and Mike lets his fingers dance across the skin he finds, eliciting a giggle from El, before his touch dips beneath the hem of her skirt. The fabric has partially rucked up from how El's legs are wrapped around him and he pushes her skirt higher up her thighs as he trails his touch towards her hip. El moans against his mouth and she shifts against him, both needing *and* knowing. God, he's never going to get over how soft her skin is or the sounds she makes when he touches her, the way she reacts like he's all she'll ever need.

Worse, Mike never *wants* to get over it. He wants to marvel and be in awe over El for the rest of his life, he wants to always, *always* feel so lucky that he gets to have her in his life and in his arms. The feeling of being with El is a kind of magic he's never found anywhere else and he just wants to *drown* in it.

But, unfortunately, any or all of that is going to have to wait.

The sound of someone knocking on the door reaches Mike's ears, but he's too caught up in El to fully react. "Hi, El? Did I get the right - oh my god!"

With twin gasps, Mike and El pull away from each other enough to

look at the intruder. It's a slim man, maybe 4-5 inches shorter than Mike, bundled up against the cold with a duffle bag slung over one shoulder - Kent, if Mike has to guess, and he's staring at Mike and El with a look of utter shock.

Mike can just imagine how this looks, him pressing El up against the mirror, her with her legs wrapped around his waist, his hand up her skirt. He'd be pretty shocked, too, if he came across two people going at it where anyone could interrupt them.

(Also, man, he and El *really* need to figure out how to not get so caught up in each other to the point where they can't keep their hands off each other no matter where they are. They keep getting caught *way* too often for Mike's tastes.)

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Kent says, hands held out in front of him like he's trying to partially block the view in front of him. "I just...." He trails off with a sound that's somewhere between a sigh and a whimper, all uncertain and embarrassed.

"Kent, hi," El says, her voice pitched higher with surprise and interrupted desire. "Sorry, we, um-"

"I'll go change, give you to a chance to, uh...yeah." Kent gives them one last look before he turns tail and runs, disappearing from the doorway in the blink of an eye.

There's a beat where Mike looks at the space where Kent once stood for about a second before he turns to look at El just in time for her to do the same. Their eyes lock and, in the next breath, both of them break out into quiet laughter. Mike leans in to press his forehead against hers, relishing her closeness - she's still wrapped around him, bodies pressed close together as he keeps her trapped against the mirror, and neither of them do anything at all to change that.

"I feel like we need to start remembering to close and lock doors," El says, words lilting with her giggles.

"I'm sure everyone would appreciate that," Mike says. "Either that or we learn to keep our hands to ourselves."

“Mmm, impossible,” El says. “You’re too irresistible.”

Mike’s heart skips a traitorous beat at the ease with which she said that, like the fact that she finds him irresistible is irrefutable. “Well, then, locked doors it is,” he says with a giddy smile.

El sighs and leans in to give him a quick peck on the lips. “You should probably let me down.”

“Don’t wanna,” Mike says, pouting, breathing out a sharp sigh through his nose. It’s mostly an act - *mostly*.

“I know, me neither,” El says. She pokes him in the shoulder, gently but insistently. “But you have to.”

Holding on to El’s waist, Mike takes a step back, letting her unwind legs from around him so she can slide down to the floor. “Oh, hey, I actually had something I wanted to ask you,” Mike says.

El smiles up at him as she reaches for his coat, fingers wrapping around the open halves. “Is this why you came down to see me?”

Mike nods. “Yeah. I was wondering if you wanted to come back over to my place tonight. I’m going over the screenplay, making edits and, well....” He trails off, sighing. “You said if there was anything you could do to help, so I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind reading it over once I’m done.”

El’s smile softens, but there’s a playful edge to it. “Of course, anything for you,” she says before she giggles once more. “Would I have to stay the night?” The question, spoken breathlessly, hits Mike like punch to the gut and he can hear the unspoken words beneath.

“Hmm, it *will* be late once we’re finished. And a true gentleman would *never* let a lady travel the streets so late,” Mike says, biting back a fierce grin.

“So, naturally, the truly gentleman thing to do would be to let me sleep in your bed. With you next to me to protect me from the horrors of the night,” El says, tipping her head up as she rises up onto her toes.

“Naturally,” Mike says, leaning over so that his lips are brushing against hers. “And I am *nothing* if not a gentleman.”

“Hmm, so you are,” El whispers before she surges up beneath him, mouth molding to his in a fierce kiss that makes him feel like the floor has disappeared beneath him, all stomach-swooping and heart-pounding and *god* he can’t get enough. He kisses her back with an intensity that sets him on fire, tongue flicking out to trace the seam of her lips as he drinks from her, his hands gripping her hips tight to hold her close.

And, just as soon as it starts, El ends it, pulling away with a high-pitched gasp that makes Mike groan - it’s a sound so reminiscent of the way she breathlessly cries out when he touches her, when he *pleases* her, and he almost can’t bear it. “Again, locked doors,” El says, trying to catch her breath.

“Yeah, I know,” Mike says as he takes a half step back. The little bit of distance helps to clear the fog of desire that swirls around him enough so he can think. “So, uh, what time will you be over? Or do you need me to come pick you up?”

“Well, I think I’ll be done here around 6,” El says, still a little breathless. “I need to stop by my place, grab a few things. I’ll see if Kent can give me a ride; if not, I’ll call a Lyft or something. So, 7? I’ll order dinner to be sent over to your place for around then.”

Mike smiles. “Sounds good. Whatever you want for dinner, also. I’m not terribly picky.”

“I’ll figure something out,” El says. Grabbing his hand, she starts pulling him towards the door. “So, I’ll see you in a bit?”

Mike turns in the doorway and takes El’s face in his hands, pulling her in for one last kiss. “Counting on it,” he says. “Have fun learning how to dance.” Mike’s aware that he’s grinning cheekily and there’s absolutely nothing he can do to stop it.

Especially not when El gives him a glare that’s as threatening as a newborn kitten. “You’re mean,” she says, pouting so adorably that Mike almost can’t resist leaning in for *another* kiss.

"I'll make it up to you later," he says.

El's eyes sparkle with mischief as she smiles. "I'm going to hold you to that." She gives him one final last kiss before pushing him into the hallway, both of them laughing and giggling the entire time.

Mike goes home with a smile affixed on his face, feeling happier than he's ever felt in his entire life. The woman he's fallen in love with will be at his house in a matter of hours and tomorrow - *god*, tomorrow - he's going to take her out for a romantic dinner where he'll completely sweep her off her feet. And no matter what happens tomorrow night, there's one thing that Mike knows with 100% certainty.

And it's that nothing will ever, *ever* be as perfect as this.

El does indeed arrive at Mike's house around 7, mere minutes ahead of the Thai food she ordered for dinner. Mike's elbows deep into editing his screenplay when the doorbell rings and El manages to pull him from it for almost an hour as they eat, talking over orders of pad thai and panang nuer.

The night passes mostly in silence: Mike making edits and giving printed pages over to El for her to read. It's good - *really* good, El thinks as the night goes on. The words leap off the page, almost literally it feels like, and El can *see* the story like never before.

It's going to be such an amazing movie, El thinks and she's so, so proud of Mike, that he's accomplished all of this and been so successful doing so.

The editing takes a little longer than anticipated, especially when El gives Mike some feedback that he wants to immediately incorporate, and it's a little after midnight when they crawl into bed, arms wrapped around each other, too late to really do anything other than go to sleep.

El's not really that disappointed, all things considered. There have been so many opportunities for her and Mike to do more than just fool around all week, so many times where she could have *finally* had sex with him, but they've passed on each and every one of them.

They're waiting, is the realization El comes to after they dress for bed - him in just his boxers, her in one of his t-shirts ("Really, you should just choose 2 or 3 and keep them," he tells her. "Clearly I'm never going to get to keep them all ever again.").

Yes, they're waiting, waiting for the *right* moment, not just the most convenient one. And El just knows, as sure as she knows that the sun rises in the east, that the right moment will be tomorrow after their date.

And she's so excited, she can hardly think straight.

So, El tries to push it out of her mind as she curls up in Mike's embrace as they lay beneath the covers, warm and snuggly.

"So, you really think it's good?" Mike asks, voice low and quiet, his voice rumbling against her ear and beneath her head where it's pillow'd against his shoulder.

El breathes out a quiet laugh, smiling softly with reassurance even though it's dark and he can't see it. The fact that Mike seems to need reassurance is both heart-piercing and incredulous at the same time. "It's fantastic," El says. "I can't wait to see it on the screen." She turns her head so that her chin rests just below his collarbone, allowing her to look at him. "I'm so proud of you."

It's just light enough in the room so that El can see Mike pull his head back enough to look at her. "You are?"

"Of course I am," El says, reaching up with the arm that was draped across his torso so she can tap him on the nose with her finger. "You worked really hard to write this in a week and it's so good. You're really, *really* talented, Mike. And I feel so blessed that you let me in enough to help you, to watch you work up close. It's *amazing*."

El hears him gulp and her breath hitches in her chest when he

reaches for her, his finger tracing lightly down the curve of her cheek, the line of her jaw. “Thank you,” he says, running his finger across her lower lip, his touch making her gasp, and El wishes it were brighter so she could see the way he’s looking at her.

But, maybe it’s better that everything is shrouded in darkness because El’s almost too overwhelmed at the emotions that are suddenly swirling in her chest, in the air that lays between them, heavy with meaning. “Nothing to thank me for,” El says, her voice thick with emotion. “Don’t ever let anyone tell you that you aren’t something special. Because you are. So, so special.”

El reaches for him then, her hand cupping his cheek for a moment before sliding up into his hair so she can pull herself up just enough to kiss him. Mike has one arm wrapped around her and he tightens it where it lays draped across her upper back, holding her even closer as her lips capture his. Their mouths move against each others with gentle sweetness and deep passion and El feels like she’s going cry, she’s so overwhelmed with the emotion that builds inside of her until she feels like she’s about to burst.

Slowly, so slowly, their kisses draw to a close, both of them breathing hard as they lay next to each other, foreheads pressed together. “I love having you here,” Mike says, voice just barely above a whisper.

“Convenient, because I love being here,” El says, opening her eyes as she brushes the skin of his cheek with her thumb in a gentle caress.

El can see the way Mike’s lips quirk up in a soft smile before he moves, lifting his head so he can press a kiss to her forehead. “C’mom, it’s late. We need to get some sleep.”

“Hmm, yes, big day tomorrow. Need to be well rested for that,” El says with a giggle. The overwhelming feeling is fading, but the depth of what she feels for Mike is still there, swirling beneath the surface and El lets the emotions wrap around her heart as Mike wraps himself around her, prompting her to turn so that he’s spooning her. El sighs as the his warmth bleed through the shirt she’s wearing to the skin of her back and she snuggles deeper into his embrace.

“Comfy?” Mike asks, breathing out a quiet laugh.

“Quite,” El says. “You’re helping me to survive these crazy cold temperatures.”

“Hmm, well I’ll share my body heat with you whenever you want,” Mike says, leaning over to lightly nip the shell of her ear, making her shiver.

Still, El lets out a light snort at the cheesiness of that statement. “Somehow, I’m not surprised,” she says with a giggle.

“Figured you wouldn’t be,” Mike says before he lowers his mouth once more to press a soft kiss to her neck. “Night, El.”

El sighs at how soft and tender his voice is and reaches down for his hand where it’s resting on her stomach, fingers lightly entwining with his. “Night, Mike.”

It doesn’t take either of them long to fall asleep and, before El knows it, it’s Friday.

The day of their date.

The air around her and Mike is giddy, *excited*, and El can feel the electricity that zips back and forth between them every time they kiss or touch or just *look* at each other.

They’re all giggles and kisses as they get ready for work, unable and unwilling to stop touching each other, to give each other anything that resembles “personal space” and El wonders how much worse it’s going to get, how much more schmoopy they’re going to be once they *do* sleep together.

God, once that happens, they’re going to nauseate everyone in a 10 block radius.

And El *cannot wait*.

The day passes by in an impatient blur of eager anticipation and

unbearably mounting passion. Mike seems to be similarly affected because they absolutely can't seem to be able to keep their hands to themselves. The breaks between blocks are filled with heated make-out sessions, all roaming hands and fiery kisses, breathless gasps and whimpering moans. They take advantage of the fact that her office door locks to attempt to take the edge off the desire that flows freely between them, but all it seems to do is make things worse.

Still doesn't stop either of them, but it's working El up almost to a frenzy and there's no guarantee that she's not just going to jump him when he comes to pick her up in a relative matter of hours, say 'screw it' to the date...and screw something (or *someone*) else instead.

But, deep down, El knows that's not what's going to happen. She's been looking forward to this date for weeks and she wants it so bad, wants a romantic night out with the man she's falling in love with, wants to get dressed up and see him dressed up too. She wants to have a long, intimate conversation over a nice meal with a good glass of wine. She wants the long, drawn out seduction of an amazing first date, wants that unbearable sweetness to suffuse every inch of her being.

El just *wants* and it feels so good even as it makes her unbearably antsy.

So, when the workday finally, *finally* draws to a close with a last ring of the bell (not that El got much in the way of work done with how distracted and over the moon she is), El's about ready to jump out of her skin with excitement.

El's just finishing up packing her things when movement out of the corner of her eye draws her attention away from her purse and she smiles when she sees Mike leaning against the doorway, jacket on, messenger bag slung over one shoulder. "Hey, there," she says, walking over to him, purse in one hand as she grabs her jacket from the coat rack behind the door. "You're not cancelling on me again are you?" she asks, winking to let him know she's teasing.

Mike rolls his eyes at her and reaches for her, not even caring that she has her hands full with her things. "As if," he says. "There's no power on this earth that could get in the way of this happening

tonight,” he says.

El almost coos out loud, but she can’t stop the way she looks up at him, batting her eyelashes. “You’re sweet,” she says before she shoves her purse at his chest. “Here, hold this.” Mike scrambles to hold onto her purse and El giggles as she slides on her jacket. “You ok, there?”

“A little more warning, next time,” Mike says, giving her a stern look that is completely ruined by the fact that he can’t seem to stop smiling.

“Got to keep you on your toes somehow, don’t I?” El asks, grinning. “Isn’t that something I need to do to keep the relationship from becoming stale and routine?”

Mike laughs. “I don’t think shoving your things at me is what they meant.”

El gives him a wide-eyed, playful look. “Oh, so you *have* read Cosmo! Any tips or tricks for ‘how to drive him wild’ I should know about?”

El can barely hold back the laughter that threatens to erupt from her at the flat, derisive look Mike gives her. “You know, I’m starting to think you don’t deserve a romantic date at all.”

“Aww, I’m sorry,” El says as she finishes getting her jacket on and takes her purse back from his hands. “Here, let me make it up to you.” She slings her purse over her shoulder and reaches for him, fingers curling into the thick fabric of his jacket so she can pull him towards her. She rises up on her toes in the heeled boots she’s wearing, tipping her head just as he leans down on reflex, their lips meeting in a kiss that is both so soft and so *hot*, she can’t help the way she moans in response. She shivers a moment later when Mike moves his hands so that he can slide his fingers into her hair, tilting her head so he can slant his mouth even harder against hers, and El never wants him to stop.

This kiss is a preview, a *taste*, of what the night has in store for them, and every nerve practically vibrates with excitement, her skin buzzing and tingling.

Slowly, *so slowly*, the kiss draws to an end and, for a moment, Mike and El just stand there, lips barely touching, breathing each other in. She opens her eyes and a gasp sticks in her throat at the way Mike's looking down at her: blown pupils, wide-eyed and incredulous, gaze full of want and amazement, like she's all he ever needs and nothing he ever expected. El knows she has to have something similar reflected in her own gaze, because she's never felt like this in her entire life, never wanted, *needed* someone so badly, never been so head over heels in love with another person *ever*. El just wants to always be with him, to always feel like this.

And something in Mike's gaze tells her he feels the same and she almost wants to cry, she's so happy.

But she doesn't, managing to hold it together enough so she can smile up at him. "What time are you picking me up?" she asks. She reaches up for him with one hand so that she's gently cupping his face, her thumb brushing lightly along the length of his cheekbone.

"Reservation's at 7, so I'll be by your place at 6:30." Mike pauses, smiling down at her, eyes twinkling with teasing amusement. "That enough time for you to get ready? I know you women tend to have a whole process."

El narrows her eyes at him and she moves her hand so she can tap his nose with her finger. "Again, no making fun of the woman you want to sleep with. It's unseemly and you might find yourself sleeping alone tonight if you keep it up."

"Hmm, bet I could convince you to change your mind," Mike says, eyebrows wagging almost comically.

El's faux stern chiding fades away as she giggles. "You're ridiculous," she says through laughter, pushing him away. "Alright, let's go. Apparently I need the time to get prettified."

Mike lets out a chortling laugh. "That's not the right use of that word," he says. "Besides, you're already insanely beautiful."

El almost melts at the casual compliment, but she holds it together so she can turn off her office lights and lock up behind her. "Charmer,"

she tosses over her shoulder, gaze softening when she sees him staring back at her.

"Just calling it like I see it," Mike says. El turns and Mike reaches for her, taking her hand in his. "Walk you to your car?"

El giggles. "How convenient, considering you parked right next to me."

Mike grins as they begin walking. "I know, lets me be a gentleman without going at all out of my way."

El rolls her eyes. "Whatever. You know you'd walk me to my car even if I parked all the way across campus." They walk outside and El can't help the way she shivers as the cold hits her.

"True," Mike says with a shrug, conceding her point. "Still, it's always nice to get two birds with one stone."

El pouts. "Those poor birds," she says, sounding all sad, and she smiles when Mike laughs, the sound so light and buoyant it makes El feel like she could just float away.

As promised, even if teasingly, Mike walks El to her car and kisses her goodbye before they separate. "See you in a couple hours," he says, the words spoken low and almost solemnly.

"See you then," El says. She kisses him one last time before she gets into her car, both of them all smiles as they drive off moments later. They follow almost the same route home and El makes sure to look over her shoulder to get one last glimpse of Mike before she turns to head to her place.

El's hands are shaking as she walks in through her front door and it's not at all because she's cold. Hell, she barely even feels the temperatures outside - she's so excited for this date that it's pushed out all other earthly and physical concerns.

In fact, El thinks she might be *too* excited. Her brain is spinning in a million directions all at the same time with all the things she needs to do and she realizes that she very badly needs to calm down if she's going to get through the next couple of hours without melting down.

So, she sets her things down near the front door, heads upstairs and sits down at the foot of the bed she hasn't slept in for the past couple of nights, just to give herself a quiet, still moment. She closes her eyes and takes in a few, long deep breaths, focusing on expanding her lungs fully with every slow inhale, feeling her heartbeat begin to slow to a normal pace as a result.

After about a minute, El feels a lot calmer. Oh, to be sure, she's still *incredibly* excited, but she doesn't feel quite as frantic. Which is good because El wants to make sure that everything is absolutely perfect and she can't focus on that if she's too busy being overwhelmed.

So, feeling sufficiently calm, El goes about the whole process of making herself look and feel fantastic. She starts with a long bath, water infused with scented oils that are reminiscent of the perfume she uses. She shaves while she soaks, taking her time to make sure her legs are as smooth as possible. She doesn't wash her hair, but she does get it damp enough so she can style it once she's out of the bath.

There's something meditative about the whole process of getting ready for a night out, a ritual that El is well acquainted with, and she's excited to be going through it for this purpose, to make herself beautiful for *Mike*.

El takes extra care styling her hair and doing her makeup, not wanting to rush anything. Her hands are steady, the familiarity of the routine stilling the excited tremor that thrums just under the surface of her skin. And then, naked as the day she was born, she walks into her bedroom to get dressed, putting on the outfit she's had picked out for what feels like forever.

El puts on the finishing touches of her outfit with nearly 15 minutes to go until Mike's supposed to get there - slipping on a simple pair of diamond studs and strategically putting on perfume, lightly applying it to the pulse points of her neck, wrists, and elbows, behind her knees, on the skin between her breasts. Once she's finished, she stands in front of her mirror, to look over the final, put-together product, *hoping* that it's good enough, that it's perfect. She thinks so, is pretty sure of it in fact.

It's just that "pretty sure" isn't good enough.

El pulls a face and reaches for her phone. *Time to ask for a second opinion*, she thinks as she pulls up her contacts and calls Max.

Max picks up a couple of rings into the call. “Hey, Ellie, what’s up?”

Still staring at her reflection, El lets out a tight sigh. “You mind FaceTiming with me for a sec? I need a second opinion.”

El can almost hear the concerned frown in Max’s voice. “Um, sure, what’s up?”

“Tonight’s my first date with Mike and I just....”

“Want to make sure it’s perfect,” Max says, finishing El’s sentence, her tone kind and soft. “Uh, yeah, sure, go ahead and show me. I mean, I don’t know how much help I’ll be if it sucks - you know me and clothes - but I can at least give you a thumbs up or down.”

El draws in a deep breath. “Alright, gimme a sec.”

A few taps on the screen later and El has her phone’s camera pointed at the mirror, her screen filled with Max’s curious face. “Alright, tell me what you think.”

There’s a beat of heavy silence before Max lets out a sigh. “Oh, El, you look amazing. Your boy’s gonna flip.”

El resists the urge to bite down on her lip, not wanting to smudge her lip gloss. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, you’re gorgeous.” There’s a pause that has El shifting her phone so she can see the screen. “So, I’m hoping you have on the right underwear,” Max says, winking as she struggles to hold back her laughter.

El scowls at the phone even as a blush rises up her cheeks. “I don’t think that’s any of your business,” El says with an indignant sniff. It doesn’t matter that Mike’s already seen her naked - it’s still not something El wants to discuss with Max in quite that detail.

Max just gives El a look. “Oh, please, you just *try* and deny that you aren’t angling to get laid tonight. You’ve pulled out all the stops,

m'dear."

El wrinkles her nose, conceding the point. "Still not telling you what kind of underwear I'm wearing."

"Oh, don't worry, I know that's need-to-know information," Max says with a laugh. "That's for the guy you got all dolled up for."

El's stomach does a funny flip at the thought what the night has in store for her, both dinner and *afterwards*. "Well, he's going to be here pretty soon, so I should-"

"Get going, I know," Max says, finishing El's sentence again. "Go impress your man, El. Have fun and be safe, yeah? Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Again, El scowls. "That doesn't cover much."

"Covers about as much as I'm betting your underwear does," Max says with a final wink, laughing once more as El's scowl just deepens. "Alright, alright, I'll stop. You're just such an easy target, Ellie."

"Ok, I'm hanging up now," El says. "Good night."

"Not as good as the one you're about to have. Night, El." Cackling, Max hangs up before El can respond, leaving El staring at her blank screen. El huffs out an exasperated sigh, shaking her head. She loves Max, she really does, but sometimes....

El gives herself a brief shake to clear her thoughts. She *really* doesn't want to think about Max anymore right now. So she lowers her phone and takes one last look in the mirror, checking to make sure that nothing is out of place before she looks away. There's about 10 minutes or so left until Mike comes to pick her up, so El spends the time doing a little bit of tidying up, starting with her room and making her way downstairs, gathering things she needs as she goes, turning on and off lights as necessary (mostly making sure that the only lights on the second floor that are on are a couple of dim lights on in her bedroom for reasons that she's too excited to think about in detail).

Only it doesn't take her long - she's barely spent any time at her place

over the past few days and it's pretty clean as far as these things go. So, only a few minutes later, El walks into her family room and sits down, her jacket and nicer looking purse, packed with her clutch and phone, sitting next to her.

Now, she waits, heart racing, skin tingling with excitement, literally on the edge of her seat with anticipation.

And then, *finally*, after 5 minutes that feels like it lasts an eternity, the doorbell rings. El's breath catches in her throat, her heart skips several beats, and a bright excited smile pulls at her lips.

Mike.

Mike's afternoon passes with agonizing slowness. He knows it's only going to take him about a half an hour to get ready and another 10 minutes to get over to El's place to pick her up. Which means, once he gets home, he has about an hour and a half to kill until he can get the ball rolling.

In theory, it's enough time to watch a movie or a couple episodes of *something*. But anticipation has given Mike the attention span of a goldfish and he can't concentrate on anything for long enough.

The first thing he does is make sure to email that damn screenplay he worked so hard to finish over to the contact he'd been given by the movie studio reps. But, after that, Mike flits from thing to thing - doing a little bit of cleaning here and there, reading about 15 pages of the book he's in the middle of, organizing his books when he gives up on reading, deciding to give *all* his dress shoes a good polish - in general, just being a nervous, anxious mess.

The only break Mike seems to get is about 10 minutes before he figures he can start getting ready when his phone rings from where he left it in the kitchen. He's polishing his shoes at the dining room table, so he hears it ring and Mike literally drops everything to run and get it. For a moment, his heart leaps into his throat - *please don't*

let it be El calling him to tell him that she has to cancel - and he lets out a sigh of relief when he sees Will's name flashing across his screen.

It takes him a couple of tries with his shaky fingers to answer and Mike carries his phone over to the table, putting Will on speaker so he can continue polishing his shoes. "Hey, man, what's up?" Mike asks, proud of how he's able to keep his voice steady (the relief that it's not El calling to cancel has temporarily calmed most of his nerves).

"Hey, whatcha up to?" Will asks.

"Polishing my shoes, why?" Mike asks as he picks up the shoe brush.

"Oh, Mike, it's Friday and you're not even 30," Will tuts. "Learn to live a little. We're all about to head out for drinks. You should join us, act your age."

Mike grins, feeling smug. "Oh, I would, but I'm afraid I have plans."

"Polishing your shoes isn't 'plans,'" Will says with a tone that lets Mike know that his oldest best friend is rolling his eyes.

"That's not my plan for the night, you ass," Mike says with a laugh. "I have a date tonight." He checks the time. "In about 45 minutes, actually."

There's a beat of silence before Will speaks again. "Oh. Oh. So, uh, this is it, yeah? Your first date?"

Mike's told Will a little of the drama surrounding the struggle to have this first "official" date, so Will understands the gravity of the moment. "Yeah, finally. When you called, I actually thought it was her calling to cancel or something. Scared the shit out of me."

Will lets out a laugh. "Oh man, I'm sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

Mike shrugs, even though Will can't see it. "Don't worry about it, man. Like you said, you didn't mean it."

"You're taking her somewhere nice, I hope," Will says and Mike can hear the smile in Will's voice.

“Yeah, there’s this nice Italian restaurant not far from here - intimate and romantic.”

Will laughs. “*Someone* sounds like they’re hoping to get lucky.”

“Nothing hopeful about it,” Mike says knowingly, a grin stretching his lips, feeling oh so smug. From everything that’s been happening between him and El whenever they have a moment alone, Mike *knows* how this night is going to end and he can’t wait.

Will snorts. “Figures.” He pauses, chuckling. “Well, make sure you’re safe.”

Mike chokes out a laugh of his own. “What, you offering to drop off condoms, or something? Not that I’m not grateful or anything. But I’m a big boy now; I *can* take care of that for myself.” Not that he *needs* to, not when they’re both clean and El has the birth control part covered, but he’s not about to tell Will any of the details of his (impending, *thank god*) sex life.

“God, you’re an asshole,” Will says. “Just trying to make sure you have everything covered. *Literally*, in this case.”

“That’s a horrible pun, Byers,” Mike says, clicking his tongue and shaking his head.

“Hey, I just learned from you. You’ve been a horrible influence on me, Wheeler,” Will says. “Well, I’ll let you go so you can get ready. So, good luck and congrats on all the sex. Now, don’t forget, it’s good form to let the *woman* come first.” Will’s barely suppressing his laughter on the other end of the line and Mike can hear it in the chuffing breaths he’s letting out

Mike snorts, rolling his eyes. “This from the man who’s never had sex with a woman. I *do* know what I’m doing in that regard, thank you very much.”

“Yeah, but it’s been a while and I wanted to make sure you didn’t forget. Everybody deserves to have orgasms, Michael.”

“Ok, that’s it, I’m hanging up now,” Mike says over Will’s laughter, hand moving to disconnect the call.

"Remember to be a gentleman-" Mike hangs up the phone before Will finishes speaking and he sighs in relief at the silence that fills the dining room.

It's not that he doesn't love Will, it's just that he *really* doesn't need to listen to Will trying to give him tips for how to have sex with El.

Just about the last thing I need, really.

With a low chuckle, Mike finishes polishing the shoe he was working on before he heads upstairs to get ready. And just as he stands up, he gets a text from Will: *seriously, man, good luck tonight. from what you've said, she sounds like a fantastic woman and i'm happy for you. lmk how it goes?*

yeah, sure thing. thx man, Mike texts back before he puts his phone on silent so he can focus on getting dressed for his date with El.

He takes a quick shower, mostly to get his hair wet so he can attempt to do *something* with it - and he actually somewhat succeeds in this regard, much to his surprise. He dresses in his best suit, complete with tie *and* cufflinks, freshly polished shoes on his feet, a couple of light dabs of cologne on his neck and jaw, before he pauses to look at himself in the mirror.

It's almost exactly how he was dressed for the Winter Ball, just with a different tie and dress shirt, and the realization fills Mike with excitement. That night had been *fantastic* and he hopes it's a sign that tonight will be just as good, if not *better*.

Mike throws on his overcoat at 6:18 and is in the car by 6:20 - *god, he's keeping track of the minutes; he seriously needs to fucking chill.* And then he's on his way to El's house to pick her up, his heart in his throat, eagerness making his skin feel *way* too tight. It's *finally* happening and Mike can't stop smiling as he drives, even though his hands are trembling with a delicious combination of happiness and anticipation.

It's a short drive over to El's and, for a moment, Mike just sits in the car after he's parked, breathing in slow and deep. God, he can't believe they're finally here, that he's finally picking her up for that

long promised first date. Everything about this moment feel *beyond* monumental and Mike wants to savor it. If everything goes as he hopes, this is the last first date he's *ever* going to go on and isn't that just the most amazing thing ever?

And, with that uplifting thought, Mike gets out of the car and goes up the steps to the front door. The first floor lights are on, their warm glow casting through the curtains and out onto the street, making El's place look homey and inviting. El's on the other side of this door, waiting for *him*, and the realization almost threatens to send his emotions into a tailspin.

Mike wishes he could stop himself from trembling as he rings the doorbell. But it's an impossible wish and Mike resigns himself to his fate. Gulping, he takes a step back to wait for the door to open and he stuffs his hands in the pockets of his coat to help keep them still. His hands almost immediately become a little clammy with nervous excitement, but it's better than them shaking uncontrollably or doing something stupid like running them through his hair, ruining both his hard work and good luck that his hair managed to somewhat behave.

Then, mere seconds after he rings the doorbell, the door opens.

And the rest of world ceases to matter. A *bomb* could go off and Mike still wouldn't be able to tear his gaze away from the heavenly vision in front of him.

El is *gorgeous* and, for a long moment, Mike just stares, completely blown away. She's wearing a beautiful dress, the color a blue so dark, it's almost black, the skin of her arms and the sweep of her collarbones left bare by the sleeveless bodice. Sheer silk stretches up and over her shoulders, becoming opaque before it hits her chest, and the way the fabric cinches and bunches reminds Mike of the folds of a toga as it drapes over her body.

His gaze lingers for a moment at the low neckline of her dress, which is *really* low in a way that makes him worry he's about to start drooling. The lower point of the v-neck rests over the middle of her sternum, but the fabric hugs to her in such a way that her breasts are completely covered, with maybe only the barest hint of the curves peeking out from beneath the silk. Her dress molds close to her torso

until it hits her waist where it flares out in a full skirt, the hem hitting just above her knees. In deference to the weather, El's wearing knee-high boots, the three-inch heel giving her a boost, and the sight of her calves encased in soft leather does such *terrible* things to his imagination that it makes Mike feel like he's about to jump out of his skin.

But most of his attention is focused, as it always is, on El's face, on her hair. Whatever makeup she's wearing is soft and gentle, highlighting the curve of her lips, the sweep of her cheekbones, the rich golden amber of her eyes. Her lips are painted with a shiny, pink lip gloss, looking so goddamn kissable he can barely hold himself back from doing just that. And her hair - *god*, her hair - is partially pulled back to keep it from falling in her face, but the rest of it is free to spill down her back and shoulders, the luxurious waves styled into the loosest of curls, and his fingers itch to sift through those strands, to feel the softness of her hair on his skin.

Mike draws in a very shaky breath, letting out a trembling sigh. "Oh, *wow*," he breathes. He's never seen anyone, any *thing* more beautiful in his entire life. El's captivatingly gorgeous, stunning in every way imaginable.

And she's staring back at him, lips parted just so, eyes wide and filled with emotion that Mike wants to lose himself in, warm and loving, swirling with a heady undercurrent of desire, as she looks at him like he's the only person she'll ever want or need.

It's official: Mike's the luckiest man on the face of the planet. *God*, he can't believe he gets to be with this amazing woman, that she wants to be with him just as bad. Mike doesn't know what he did to deserve this, but he knows one thing without a doubt:

For as long as El lets him, Mike's never, *ever* going to let go.

For a moment, El can't remember how to breathe and she doesn't even feel the cold air coming in through her open door.

Not when Mike is standing there on her doorstep, impeccably dressed, looking at her like she's the only woman in the entire universe.

El's heart races as she drinks in the sight of him - hair just beginning to rebel against the order Mike's imposed on it, making him look a little disheveled in the way she absolutely loves; fitted suit peering out from underneath the open halves of his overcoat; one single suit coat buttoned so that she can still see the navy blue tie he's wearing, the color almost exactly matching her dress.

But it's really Mike's face that has El captivated as he looks at her, eyes roaming up and down her body, taking her in, gaze filled with disbelieving hope as it dances across her face. Mike looks at her like there's never been anyone more beautiful in the history of anything ever and it sets off a thousand butterflies in her stomach, fluttering wings brushing against every inch of her skin. All she wants is for him to keep looking at her like that for the rest of their lives.

But not while they're standing in her open doorway, the cold, Chicago winter creeping into her house and chilling her bare skin in a way she almost can't ignore any longer.

Still, El finds it easy to not care about the temperatures when she hears Mike speak, a low "oh, wow," breathing out from between his lips, and she feels the sentiment warm her from within.

It overwhelms her with just how *cherished* Mike makes her feel and she has to look away before she does something silly like launch herself at him or drag him upstairs so he can keep making her feel this way as they undress and love each other.

But, she's hungry and she knows she's going to need to eat if she wants the night to last as long as she hopes it will.

So, El takes in a deep breath and looks back up at him, smiling gently. "You like it?" she asks, one hand coming down to finger the fabric of her skirt.

"God, you look amazing," Mike says, voice low and overrun with emotion. "I almost can't believe you're real."

El giggles, feeling light and bubbly and completely untethered from gravity. “I’m quite real, don’t worry.”

Mike smiles at her and he huffs out a quiet laugh, shaking his head like he can’t believe *any* of this is real. It’s a feeling El completely sympathizes with. It’s like she’s in the middle of the most incredible dream and she never wants to wake up. “You, uh, ready to go?” he asks, stumbling a bit over the words.

He’s nervous, El realizes. Her stomach swoops at the thought and El’s so touched that he cares as much as he does. “Yeah,” she says, letting go of the door. “Just let me grab my things.” El all but runs to grab her coat and purse from the family room and she manages to get her coat mostly on by the time she’s back at the front door. “Gimme a sec,” she says as she slings her purse over her shoulder.

“Here, let me help,” Mike says and he reaches for her, gently freeing her hair from beneath the collar of her coat while she does up the buttons. His fingers just barely brush against the skin along the back of her neck and El giggles when it tickles a bit. “Sorry,” Mike says a moment later. But he doesn’t pull his hand away, resting it instead on the side of her neck, his palm warm against her skin.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” El says as she looks up at him. *God*, she wants to kiss him. It would be so easy to do, too, just stretch up onto her toes and pulling him down so that her lips can capture his. But El knows if she kisses him, they’ll never actually leave to go have dinner. So she doesn’t dare.

Instead, she smiles up at him and reaches for his other hand. “Shall we?”

Mike returns the smile and shifts his hand in hers so that he can lace his fingers with hers. “We shall.” He gives her a moment to close and lock her door before he walks them to his car, opening the door like the sweet man that he is.

The car’s interior is warm and El gratefully sinks into the heated seats as she watches Mike go around to his side, occupying her hands by buckling her seat belt. And moments later once they’re both safely inside the car, right before Mike pulls away from the curb, El reaches

out and lays a hand on Mike's forearm, the thick wool of his coat cool against her palm.

Mike looks over at her in the darkened interior of the car, one eyebrow arched with curiosity. "What is it?" he asks, voice low and intimate.

El smiles, the expression feeling tremulous, and she feels too small to contain all the emotion that swirls inside of her. "I'm just...really happy we're doing this," she says, forcing the words out through a throat that feels suddenly too tight.

"I am, too," Mike says, looking down at her with a soft smile before he leans over the center console. El meets him halfway in a kiss that has her breath hitching in her chest, his lips soft where they dance against hers. His hand finds its way into her hair and El just about cries with how good it feels, with how her heart is filled with butterflies and she's not entirely sure she's not going to explode into pure happiness. God, everything about tonight is just *too much*, even the little things - *especially* the little things.

The kiss comes to a slow end, neither of them wanting to move away from each other for a least a couple of moments. El can feel the soft exhalations of his breath against her lips and jaw and she shivers at the light, tickling sensation. And then she opens her eyes, looking up at him in the dim light from the nearby streetlamp, and she giggles.

"What? What's so funny?" Mike asks, lips pulling up in a smile.

"You're wearing half of my lip gloss," El says through her giggles. "Here, let me get that." She runs her thumbs across his lips, wiping away the remnants of pink lip gloss.

"Teaches you to wear anything related to lipstick," Mike says. "Unless you *want* me wearing it. Then that's a whole different conversation."

El's shoulders shake with silent laughter as she shakes her head at him. "You're ridiculous."

"And yet, you're here with me," Mike says in a quick retort. "So that sounds like a 'you' problem."

El gives his lips one final swipe with her thumb before she gives him a look, fighting off the smile that threatens to overtake her. "Alright, no more lip gloss. You can take us to dinner now."

Mike grins. "Yes, ma'am. Right away, ma'am."

El pushes at his cheek with her hand, recentering him over his own seat. "Just drive, you goof."

Mike winks at her and pulls away from the curb, reaching over to take her hand in his once he's going straight. With the exception of the radio playing at a low volume, the car ride is silent, both of them content to exist in this moment. El savors everything about this - the excited staccato of her heartbeat, the buzzing tingle that zips across her skin, the addictive smell of his cologne, the warmth of his hand in hers as he gently caresses the skin of her thumb with his own. She just wants to commit everything to memory, wants to always carry this night with her.

And she hopes, fervently hopes, that this is only the first of many nights like this, that their future holds a near endless series of nights together. And El knows that she will do whatever it takes to make that hope a reality.

The drive to the restaurant isn't long - 10 minutes, maybe - and El waits after Mike parks the car for him to open her door for her. The only reason why she bothers is because she *knows* he'll give her a look if she tries to open it herself. Plus the cute little smile he gives her as he holds the passenger door open makes it all worthwhile. "Thank you, kind sir," she says with a light giggle.

"Anything for you, milady," Mike says with a toothy grin. It's El's favorite of his smiles and her heart skips a beat at the sight of it, even as she reaches for his hand.

"Well, then, lead the way to dinner," El says, smiling back just as brightly.

Mike tugs on her hand, prompting her to start walking by his side. "Right this way," he says. They walk down the street and around the block, their steps brisk due to the frigid temperatures that surround

them. But it's only a couple of minutes until Mike pulls El under the awning of a restaurant and El peers at the door curiously, taking in the dark wood and tarnished brass door handle.

Mike reaches for the door and opens it while El looks up at him. "After you," he says, gesturing towards the entryway with a sweeping arm, looking like he's about to bow to her.

El arches an eyebrow playfully and she can't stop smiling up at him. "Thank you. Such a gentleman."

"Like my mother raised me."

The inside of the restaurant is warm, a combination of the heat from the kitchen and from the patrons who occupy the tables. It's a nice restaurant, El notices as she looks around, all dark wood and intimate lighting, candles on every table giving just enough light for people to see their dining companions, but dim enough to partially shroud the rest of the restaurant, making people feel like they're the only people in the restaurant if you ignore the low din of the other patrons eating and talking in low tones.

The restaurant is decorated almost stereotypically Italian, complete with red-checkered tablecloths and bottles of olive oil and balsamic vinegar at each table. It reminds her of a restaurant back in Hawkins, the place where she went on her first ever date when she was 16, and the nostalgia just adds an extra layer of magic to the entire night.

Mike helps El out of her coat, the backs of his knuckles trailing lightly down the bare skin of her arms, before he shrugs out of his own, hanging them on one of the coat racks. El cozies up to him as they make their way to the hostess' stand, a small thrill running through her when his hand comes down to rest on the small of her back to help guide her, his palm so very warm through the fabric of her dress.

They're a little early, so the hostess goes to make sure their table is ready and El turns to Mike once she's gone. "This place is amazing," she says, resting her hands against his jacket-covered chest as she looks up at him.

“Yeah?”

El nods. “I love it.”

Mike lets out a laugh. “But you haven’t even eaten yet. You could hate it.”

“Not possible,” El says. “I’m here with you, so nothing else matters.” She reaches up for him, then, fingers wrapping around the lapels of his jacket to pull him down towards her. She kisses him, then, with soft lips and a teasing tongue, inviting him to reciprocate, which he does after a beat. His hands come up to cradle her face as he kisses her back, his fingers resting gently along the sides of her neck, his palms large and warm against her cheeks and jaw, and El feels like she’s flying, her soul singing with his touch. They’re both smiling as they trade soft, lingering kisses and the world begin to fade away as the love she feels for him swells inside of her.

But, before they can both get too carried away, a voice calls out to them. “Excuse me, Mr. Wheeler? Your table is ready.”

Both Mike and El break away from the kiss to look at the hostess, who, to her credit, looks completely unfazed that she interrupted two of her customers making out in the waiting area of a nice restaurant.

Probably sees this quite a bit, El thinks as Mike drops his hands, one of them resuming their previous position pressed up against the small of her back. “Thank you,” Mike says, voice a little strained and embarrassed sounding at getting both caught *and* interrupted making out.

Mike doesn’t move his hand as they follow the hostess to their table, a small booth that is both cozy and intimate. Mike and El sit down next to each other at the small, circular table, sinking a little into the soft leather seat of the booth. A small thrill runs up El’s spine when she feels his feet up against hers and she wishes she weren’t wearing boots so she could slip off one of her shoes and run her bare feet up under the hem of his slacks, feel his bare skin beneath her toes. But it’s too cold to wear anything except for boots and El’s not willing to sacrifice her toes just to touch him.

Especially when there's time for that *later*.

The hostess drops off menus and lets them know their server will be with them soon before she walks away, leaving Mike and El alone. *On their first date.*

The next few minutes pass by with low, sporadic conversation as they peruse the menu, picking out what they want, deciding to share just about everything, choosing easily the things they want to eat. And the entire time, they're smiling at each other, happy beyond all earthly reason to be doing this together.

The waiter comes by after a bit and Mike and El order both dinner and drinks in one go. There's no concern over rushing this, over not drawing this out. Even if dinner ends up taking just over an hour, El knows they're going back to her place and that Mike's not going to leave once he drops her off, that he's going to stay with *her*. They literally have all night and dinner is only a part of it.

The waiter drops off their drinks, each of them ordering a glass of sparkling wine (the occasion feels momentous enough to be worth celebrating), and El lifts her glass leadingly. "You want to give a small toast?"

Mike follows suit as he grips his glass by the stem. "What should we toast to?" he asks, giving her a soft smile. His gaze dances across her face like he wants to look at all of her all at once and El almost leans over to kiss him in response.

"Hmm," she says, leaning forward just a little, arm not holding the champagne glass folded along the edge of the table. "How about to fantastic first dates?"

Mike smiles. "I like it. Also, here's to many nights just like this."

El light taps her glass against his, feeling her heart swell in her chest with overwhelming emotion. "To all the nights." She sips from her glass, holding his gaze as she does so, and the look in his eyes, full of warmth and love and desire, makes her feel more effervescent than the bubbles in her glass.

Sighing, El sets her glass down and looks away - she has to, otherwise she might melt from the intensity of his gaze. She looks around the restaurant once more, giggling at the decor of the restaurant. It really is a much nicer version of Giovanni's back in Hawkins - cloth tablecloths instead of vinyl, real candles in the low candle holders, leather seats instead of faux ones.

"What's so funny?" Mike asks.

El shakes her head and takes another sip of her sparkling wine. "It's silly," she says, looking over at him.

Mike scoots closer and reaches for her beneath the table, hand resting gently on her thigh. "Well, now you *have* to share," he says, grinning.

The dim lighting of the restaurant makes Mike look even more handsome than El thought possible and she caves under the combination of the imploring look he's giving her and the thrilling caress of his fingers through the fabric of her dress. El turns towards him, crossing her legs just below where his hand is on her thigh. "It's just...this place reminds me - in the best way, mind you - of the restaurant I went to on my first date ever."

Mike's grin widens even more. "Yeah?"

El giggles. "Yeah, the town I went to high school in has this really cheesy Italian restaurant and it's pretty much First Date central."

"Gee, I can't imagine why," Mike says, shaking his head as he laughs, the sound low and resonant. "Small town?"

El lets out a bright laugh as she nods. "Yeah, really small."

"It's not where you grew up, though, is it? I remember you saying that you moved before high school," Mike says, head tilting curiously.

"That's right, I can't believe you remember me saying that," El says, shaking her head - *it seems they're finally talking about this; how "typical first date" of them.* "I grew up in Indianapolis, actually, until I moved right before high school after my parents got divorced."

Mike quirks an eyebrow, a wistful smile crossing his face. “Shame, we just missed each other then - Indianapolis is where I moved to *during* high school.”

El leans forward, chin propped up in her open palm. “Your parents still live there?”

“Yeah, in a house that is now way too big for them,” Mike says. “But my parents won’t sell it, so....”

El rolls her eyes. “Parents, go figure.”

Mike grins. “I know, right? So, did you miss Indianapolis when you moved?”

El snorts. “Right, who misses Indianapolis?”

“Some people might, El,” Mike says, teasingly chide. “Don’t be such a snob.”

El rolls her eyes. “Sorry, didn’t know you were the Middle America Police.”

“Hey, now,” Mike says, nudging her with his foot. “I don’t *have* to drive you home, you know.”

“You do if you don’t want to sleep alone tonight,” El says behind her glass, quirking her eyebrow at him as she takes a sip of sparkling wine.

“Please, like you don’t *desperately* want this,” Mike says, gesturing at himself with a teasing grin plastered on his face.

El laughs and shakes her head a bit. “Anyway, I guess I didn’t really miss Indianapolis when I moved. I mean, my best friend lived there, so I missed *her*. But the town I moved to felt like *home* almost immediately. Still kinda does, actually.”

“Your parents still live there?” Mike asks before he takes a sip of his wine.

“Well, my dad - it’s his hometown we moved to - and, yeah, he still

lives there with my stepmom. It's where I spend the holidays now.”

Mike smiles, lifting one shoulder with a half shrug in a move that is way too attractive and devil-may-care for his own good. “I won’t lie - I was curious about where you were during Christmas break. I wanted to ask where you were, but I knew that if I knew where you were, I would have ditched my family in a heartbeat to come see you.”

El’s heart does a funny flip in her chest and she can’t stop the giggling sigh that escapes from her. “Well, it wouldn’t have been too far out of your way, if you were in Indianapolis. My hometown, if you can call it that, is only about an hour away from there.”

Mike’s smile turns into a toothy, excited grin. “Ok, now you *have* to tell me. I need to be tortured with this knowledge of just how close you were during the worst weeks of my life.”

El quirks an eyebrow, smirking. “You probably haven’t heard of it. No one I’ve talked to outside of people I went to high school with have *ever* heard of it, much less know where it is.”

Mike just gives her a look, challenge glinting in his eyes, as he leans in, excitement radiating from him. “Try me.”

El lets out an amused sigh and shakes her head, almost incredulous. “Alright, you geography nerd. The place I lived in during high school is this tiny town in Indiana by the name of Hawkins, one of those blink-and-you-miss-” El’s words come to a sudden halt at the look on Mike’s face, shock taking over his features as his eyes widen and his mouth drops open.

“Oh my god, *no way*,” Mike breathes before El can ask what’s wrong. “Are you fucking serious right now?”

A feeling that El can only describe as nervous anticipation spreads over her skin, leaving numbing tingles in its wake. “Why, have you heard of it?”

Mike lets out a laugh. “Heard of it? Oh my god, El, *I grew up there*.”

It’s El’s turn to be shocked and an incredulous smile crosses her lips.

"Are you serious? No way, you can't be."

Mike nods, smiling through his shock, looking like he's on the verge of hysterical laughter. "Honest to god," he says. "Moved away three weeks before freshman year of high school."

El gasps, hand coming up to cover her mouth as the realization sweeps through her. "Holy shit, we missed each other by a week. My dad and I moved there literally only a couple of weeks before school started." God, she could have met him so much sooner. The weight of the missed years presses heavily on El's shoulders with startling suddenness and melancholy sweeps through her. *So close and yet....*

Mike laughs, shaking his head. "God, can you imagine if we had *actually* gone to high school together? I would have been the nerdy kid with the crush on the girl who was way out of his league. And you were probably the beautiful, popular girl who would have never noticed me."

El gives Mike a look, still feeling weirdly giddy over the small-world-coincidence of it all. "Hey, I love nerds. What makes you think I wouldn't have noticed you?"

"Um, years of experience in the real world?" Mike says. "Pretty girls never looked twice at me."

El frowns. "I would have noticed you, I swear." And she knows in her heart that it's the truth. There's no universe out there in which El Hopper wouldn't notice Mike Wheeler.

But Mike's still smiling sadly at her. "Right, you probably didn't even notice my friends, who I can guarantee you had classes with."

El squares her shoulders, looking at Mike with a determined grin. "Challenge accepted. Try me, Wheeler. Who were your friends?"

Mike looks at her with a quirked eyebrow and a smug smile. "Alright, I'll even make it easy on you. The one you'd probably have the highest likelihood of knowing is my friend Lucas, Lucas Sinclair - I know he played baseball during junior and senior year, so you'd probably know of him - but I was also, and still am, best friends with

Dustin Henderson and Will Byers, who I can *guarantee* you haven't - um, El? Are you ok?"

No, El's not ok.

She's not ok *at all*.

In fact, she's the furthest from ok she's ever been in her entire life.

El is frozen, shock crashing into her with breath-stealing numbness. She knows she's staring over at Mike, but she can't stop, can't even move to cover her gaping mouth, her jaw having fallen slack with surprise. She's suddenly short of breath and it's like the air's been stolen from her lungs, leaving her hollow and empty and *weightless*. Time feels like it's slowed to a crawl and she wishes she knew what to think, how to feel.

"Are you serious right now?" El asks, somehow getting the words out, *needing* to know. Her voice sounds faint and weak as she searches Mike's face for any hint of malice, of joking.

Because it's the only thing that makes sense. This *has* to be a joke, a cruel joke at her expense, put on by Will and his friends.

Oh god, his friends.

It's hitting her all at once, the pieces fitting together all too neatly: Mike Wheeler and Mysterious Mike are the *same person*, this person she has been so close to meeting so many times over the past 14 years, and El almost wants to cry. This has to be a joke, just *has* to be.

The only alternative is that they somehow fell in love with each other and weren't able to put the pieces together, which seems so implausible, El dismisses it out of hand. Because she would know. She *would...wouldn't* she?

"El, you're starting to scare me," Mike says, brow furrowing in concern as he reaches for her, his touch light on her bare forearm, like he's scared of spooking her.

El almost flinches at the touch of his hand on her skin-

(she's seen her brother's friend naked, her brother's friend has seen her naked. oh god, they've touched each other and she's planning on having sex with him tonight.)

-but El looks at him. *Really* looks at him. Mike's looking at her with open concern, his heart on his sleeve, every emotion broadcasted for the entire world to see. He's *worried* about her, working himself up into an anxious frenzy, confusion etched across every line of his face.

"They didn't hurt you, did they? I mean, I wasn't with them in high school, so I don't know everything, but I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding, whatever it is. I can call them right now, if you want, so they can apologize. Or whatever you want, really. Just... *please*, El, tell me what's going on." Mike's rambling, his voice pitching with concern and confusion, sounding almost frantic.

And El knows in this very moment, knows all the way down to the center of her soul, that there's no way any of this is a joke or malicious prank.

That, somehow - and in a way she thinks she might never understand - she fell in love with her brother's best friend, who she's pretty sure has fallen in love with her, too... *and they had no idea.*

It's a truth that resonates with her down to the very fiber of her being. For one, Mike's a *horrible* actor - he gives himself away *way* too easily. But, also, he's not that cruel, that heartless. Mike's one of the sweetest people she's ever met. She's seen him with their students, seen how much he cares, how easily he gives of himself. He would never...no, *could* never toy with her emotions like that.

El does the only thing she *can* do: she lets out a breathless laugh, stunned at the serendipity of it all, marveling at the coincidence, thinking about all the things that had to go just *not right* to get to this moment.

"Oh my god," El gasps out, hands coming up to clap together in front of her face, the edges of her index fingers pressed against her mouth, which is still slack with surprised and shock.

Her mind is spinning, swirling with *could have beens* and *almosts*, the

pieces falling into place with the piercingly painful clarity of hindsight, and she knows that she is never, *ever* going to get over this.

El almost loses it at the way Mike's face goes from concerned confusion to just *confusion*, almost pouting like a toddler who isn't getting his way. "El, what's going on?"

El drops her hands so that they lay in her lap, her napkin pressing against her knuckles. Her lips are beginning to curve up in a stunned smile. "Oh my god, you're the Paladin." She breathes the words, almost hushed with reverence. This man in front of her is the man she has heard so much about over the years, who's such a crucial part of who her friends are that El thinks she's probably loved him for years without even being aware of it.

El can see it, the way Mike freezes, instantly wary as suspicion crawls up and over his features. He leans back in the booth, paling a little in the dim candlelight. "How do you know that?" he asks, eyeing her, unsure what's going on.

El almost laughs again, but she bites it back, knowing this isn't the time. Slowly, with all the experience of literally having *just* gone through this mind-boggling revelation seconds before, El leans forward and reaches out to gently lay her hand on Mike's forearm, which is lying almost limp on the table between them. She takes in a deep breath and hopes the smile on her face is soft and comforting.

"Mike," she says, breathing out his name, incredulity bubbling up in her throat. "Will Byers is my step-brother."

For a moment, an eternity of a breathless second, Mike isn't sure he heard El right.

Half of his brain is still too wrapped up in the web of coincidence surrounding him and El - that she moved to his hometown *a week* after he moved away, that he was *thisclose* to meeting her so many

years before - while the other half is still concerned about what his friends could have done to put that horrified shock on El's face when he told her their names.

So, when El tells him that Will is her step-brother, that she's Will's step-sister, Mike almost doesn't register the words.

It takes time for them to slowly worm their way into his brain, for their meaning to fully hit, and there's a moment when he thinks she *has* to be fucking with him. There's no way - *no fucking way* - she and Will are step-siblings and he wouldn't have known. It's just absolutely and completely implausible.

But then he looks at her face, sincerity etched in every line on her face, shining from her eyes, reflect in the gentle curve of her smile, and Mike knows. *He knows.*

El's telling the truth.

And, suddenly, all of the pieces fall into place with undeniable clarity, hitting him like a goddamn Mack truck.

"Oh my god," he gasps out, the numbness of shock spreading through his veins with icy tendrils. "Oh my god, *Janie? You're Janie?*"

El withdraws her hand and shudders. "Oh god, don't call me that, I'm begging you," she says with a reflex that drives home, more than anything, that she's telling the truth.

Mike's still working through his shock and he gasps again. "No way. No fucking way!"

El lets out a manic laugh, sounding almost just as shocked as he feels, and she shakes her head. "Trust me, I know. *I know.*"

For half a moment, Mike thinks this is a cruel joke, that she's been leading him on (he's heard stories about Janie, about how she could be flighty back in high school - *oh god, not Janie, El; holy shit, he's never going to get over this for as long as he lives*) , making fun of her brother's nerdy friend.

But he immediately dismisses the thought when images of El's

shocked expression from just moments ago flashes in his mind's eye - the way her face slackened with shock, cheeks going pale, eyes wide - no, that was honest and genuine shock, the kind of surprise that can't be faked. Besides, Mike *knows* her, knows how sweet and nice and kind El is; she would *never* toy with him like this.

There's a moment, then, where Mike and El just stare at each other, pieces falling into place, looking at each other with new and old eyes at the same time, trying to make sense of the absolute *strangest* twist life's ever thrown at them.

And then, they burst out laughing, stunned silence having turned to incredulous amusement. Laughing is the only thing they can do, really - it's the only way Mike can think of to cope with what's happening to him and he's glad he didn't have to have this revelation under the watchful eyes of his friends.

No, of their friends.

Suddenly, a pang of bittersweet melancholy hits him right in the heart. Because they could have met, could have been doing *this* so many years ago - *should* have been, actually. And though Mike somehow knows that he and El would have always ended up here, no matter what, it's still a little sad to think of all those lost years.

El tilts her head, brow furrowing with concern. "You ok?"

Mike shakes his head, breathing out a laugh. "Yeah, just...." He trails off, sighing, as he looks at her, *really* looks at her, at this beautiful, incredible woman he's fallen head over heels for, who's already so entwined with his entire life, in ways he never knew until this moment, that there's no way he'll ever be able to untangle her from him. And more, he never *wants* to. "Still can't believe it. I mean, *holy shit*, El."

El lets out a giggle. "I know, believe me, I still haven't wrapped my brain around it."

Mike looks at her and feels like he's seeing her for the first time. "And...you had no idea? None at all?"

"That you and my brother's friend are the same person?" El asks with an arched eyebrow. "Nope, not at all. God, I can't believe neither of us figured it out sooner."

Mike groans, head tilting so he can rest it on the top of the booth's seat. "Oh my god, the guys are going to make fun of us for this for the rest of our lives."

El shudders and reaches for her glass. "Oh god, it's like you *want* to drive me to drink," she says before she takes a large sip of sparkling wine. "They give me enough shit for everything as it is."

Mike laughs - he can't help it and he raises his hands to press over his eyes for a brief moment. "Oh my god, I'm sorry, but I just don't think I'm ever going to get over this."

"Me neither, to be perfectly honest," El says with a snort.

Mike lowers his hands so he can look over at her. She's smiling over at him, the expression filled in incredulity and amazement, but still, she's *smiling*, the look in her eyes filled with fond warmth that swims easily with the shock that's still there. "Does this change things, do you think? With us?" He doesn't think so, but still...he needs to ask. And, given just how intertwined their lives are, he needs to be absolutely sure that she's not having second thoughts, that it hasn't changed things for the worse.

Because he wouldn't blame her if it has. Who knows what image she's built up of him from the things she's heard from the rest of the Party? Mike knows he had his own assumptions about "Janie" that have been shattered to pieces with the revelation that El and Janie are the *same person*, and he also knows that those assumptions are going to linger in the back of his mind for quite some time until he accepts this strange turn his life has taken. So, it's safe to assume that El is working through something similar in her own head.

Which means Mike is relieved when El breathes out a quiet laugh and reaches for him, her hand taking his from where it's resting on the seat between them. His heart skips a beat at the way her touch sends a thrill up his arm and down his spine, spreading across his skin like fire. "I won't lie: this is weird, *really* weird. But we're both going

through it together, so it's not like there was an uneven distribution of knowledge or anything." She smiles, lips full and playful as she runs her thumb across the skin on the top of his hand, her touch light and teasing. "Besides, does *this* feel like anything's changed?"

Mike smiles, mouth stretching in a wide grin, feeling like he's flying high, amped up on adrenaline like he's just gotten off the world's wildest roller coaster. "For the better, maybe. Definitely not *worse*."

El giggles. "Wanna be sure?" she asks, teeth tugging on her lower lip as she leans in just a little, eyebrows quirked suggestively.

Mike swallows a moan at the sight of her biting her lip - *god*, that never fails to drive him absolutely crazy - and he shifts in his seat, leaning in so that her face is just inches from his, close enough so that he can feel the rapid exhalation of her breath against his cheek. Her eyelashes flutter, her gaze dropping down to his mouth, and Mike can see the way her cheeks flush in the candlelight that surrounds them. His heart beats rapidly in his chest and he can't stop the way his gaze dances across her face, unable to stop looking at her, but his lips *ache* to kiss her and he can't ignore the urge any longer.

So he doesn't, leaning in the rest of the way as his hand slides up to cup her cheek, his mouth meeting hers in a feather-soft kiss, her lips parting against his *just so*. Every nerve ending explodes in sheer pleasure as she kisses him back, like fireworks beneath his skin, and Mike slants his mouth even more against hers, his fingers sliding into her hair to hold her closer as he pours himself into the kiss. El whimpers against his mouth, pushing up against him as the kiss turns from sweet to *hot* from one breath to the next, her hands coming up to rest on the sides of his neck, fingers splayed across his skin like she wants to hold him close forever.

It's the most incredible kiss of Mike's entire life - and that's saying something considering all the kisses he and El have shared over the past few weeks since she first kissed him in the hallway in front of his classroom. It's a kiss that's rich with knowledge of all the ways he feels about her, a kiss with the blinders completely removed from his eyes and heart...a kiss filled with the weight of their shared history, of how close they've been all this time, of all the *almosts* and *should*

have beens and *finallys*, of all the ways they are and will be connected for the rest of their lives.

El ends the kiss first, pulling away just slightly, and Mike can't help the pitiful sound that escapes from his throat at the slight distance. "I think that answers that question," she says, voice breathy and rich with barely held back desire. She smiles coyly up at him, eyes sparkling as they fill with inspiration. "Hey, you wanna get out of here, ask for our food to-go?"

Mike grins, his heart beating rapidly in his chest as he struggles to catch his breath. "What did you have in mind, exactly?" he asks, thumb brushing against her cheek near the corner of her jaw.

El lets out a quiet giggle, shivering a little at his touch. "Well, we have *a lot* to talk about and I think my couch is the perfect place to have this conversation, especially while we eat good Italian food and drink good wine. I have several bottles of nice red to choose from, if that sounds like an interesting proposition."

Mike can't help it as he arches an eyebrow, his heartbeat somehow picking up even more as a thrill runs down his spine. "Wait, are you *actually* propositioning me right now?" he asks, laughter bubbling up in his chest.

"If you want me to be," El says, voice pitching with a breathiness he's become very well acquainted with over the past week, her eyes darkening, and Mike has to bite back a groan.

Holy shit, Will's going to kill him. Because Mike is absolutely, positively going to have sex with his best friend's sister before the night is over.

And it's going to be amazing.

"Hmm, well then," Mike says, leaning in to brush a barely-there kiss against her lips, knowing that he's totally teasing *both* of them right now. "Let's get out of here."

El smiles at him, bright enough to outshine all the stars in the sky, and Mike feels his heart stutter in response. "Ok," she breathes.

When their waiter eventually comes by a few minutes later, El is the one who asks if they can actually get everything to go along with a couple of orders of tiramisu, her voice kind yet confident. Their waiter is completely unfazed by the request, smiling politely as he goes off to get everything ready, leaving Mike and El to stay snuggled up against each other in their booth as they finish the drinks they ordered.

“Have a good evening,” the hostess calls out to them once they’ve received and paid for their food, Mike helping El into her coat before he bundles up himself.

“We will,” El says, voice heavy with suggestion as she looks up at him, grin full of mischief.

Mike can only respond with a shake of his head as he leads them out of the restaurant, one hand pressed against her lower back while the other holds the bag with their food in it, both of them ready for the next portion of the night to begin.

It’s not long before they’re at her house and Mike *finally* gets a good look at the place El calls home. The lights are all still on from before, which lets Mike look with ease as he takes both his overcoat and suit jacket off.

“You can put your coats there,” El says as she takes the food from him after she’s taken off her own jacket, gesturing to the hooks along the wall by the front door with a tilt of her head. “I’ll go plate dinner. Make yourself at home.” She gives him a flirtatious grin before she turns and walks away

“Ok,” Mike says and, for a second, he watches her go, mesmerized by the graceful movement of her steps, the sway of her hips beneath the fullness of her skirt, the way her hair bounces with each step. And then she disappears around a corner, through a doorway at the end of the hall that stretches out in front of him, and Mike feels the distance separating them like a physical thread that’s been pulled taut.

Once she’s out of sight, Mike hangs up his coats and toes off his shoes. And, after a brief moment of consideration, he removes his socks as well - El’s house is warm and there are rugs scattered across

the hardwood floors, so he doesn't need the socks to keep his feet from getting cold.

(besides, he thinks as hope blossoms inside of him, there's no good way to take off your socks when you're trying to have sex with someone. he's just being practical. honestly.)

Barefoot, Mike lets himself wander through the rooms on the first floor of El's brownstone. He spares a glance up the staircase that leads almost straight from the front door, offset a bit to make room for the hallway that runs the length of the house, and his heart gives a strange pitter-patter at the thought of going up to her room, anticipation sparking in his veins as he thinks about exactly *why* they'll be going up there.

Off to the left from the entryway is the living room, a couple of couches along two of the three walls, a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf built into other. There are pictures and knick knacks mixed in with the books, serving as bookends on a few of the shelves, and Mike takes a second to peruse both the books *and* the pictures. The books are an eclectic mix of non-fiction *and* fiction, ranging from thriller novels to psychology texts to light-hearted biographies. There's a little bit of everything and Mike finds himself falling even more in love with her at just the sheer array and variety of books on her shelves. El has a fascination with *everything* that rivals his own and he can't believe he's found someone who shares his love for learning so keenly.

But what Mike finds himself lingering over the most are the *pictures*.

He won't deny it: the first picture he sees of her with Will in it startles him. He gasps like he's been punched in the gut and he reaches for it with a trembling hand. It's an older picture, one from a few years ago (Mike knows this from the haircut Will's sporting in it). They're hugging each other close while they stand outside somewhere, smiling while they face the camera, cheeks pressed tightly together, smiling so wide their eyes are almost squeezed shut. From the way the picture's shot, Mike knows it's one Jonathan took - can tell from the way the background is masterfully out of focus, in the way the colors of El and Will's clothes pop in the foreground.

And it's this picture, and the others he finds that has Will in them, that dispels the last of the disbelief surrounding this whole "El is Janie" thing. Because it's *proof*, undeniable and real, that El's been a figurative arm's reach away for years.

Shaking his head, feeling both a little sad and a lot bemused, Mike continues his self-guided tour of El's house. The doorway in the back of the living room leads to the dining room and Mike peers in quickly before he backtracks towards the front door, crossing the entryway into the den.

He can see movement out of the corner of his eye and Mike turns just a bit where he can see completely into the kitchen. There's no wall separating the two rooms, which gives Mike every opportunity to stare at El. She has her back to him and she's taken off her boots somewhere in the past couple of minutes, so she's padding barefoot around the kitchen as she plates their food from the restaurant. Smiling, Mike looks around the great room, all warm colors and plush furniture, and his smile only grows as he sees the bottle of wine on the coffee table, uncorked with two empty glasses sitting next to it.

"Hey," he calls out, looking over at her. "Did you want me to pour the wine?"

"Have at it, champ," El calls back over her shoulder with a saucy wink.

Mike rolls his eyes, trying and failing to fight off the excited grin that pulls at the corners of his mouth, and he sits down on what is probably the most comfortable couch he's every sat on in his entire life. He reaches for the wine bottle, giving the label a quick look - though he knows *nothing* about wine, so he has no idea if it's any good, but since El picked it out, he figures it probably has to be - and he pours what he hopes is a decent amount in each glass, splitting about a third of the bottle between the two.

A couple drops of wine trail down the outside of the neck of the bottle and Mike reaches for them, wiping them away with his thumb as his other hand pulls at the knot of his tie. His brain is still stuck in "making himself at home" territory and he thinks nothing of it as he

pulls his tie completely loose before reaching to drape it over the arm of the couch next to him.

“Getting comfortable, I see,” El says and Mike turns to see her walking towards him, a plate in each hand, silverware tucked in between her fingers.

Mike grins as he goes to roll up his shirt sleeves. “Well, you *did* say to make myself at home,” he says. “Besides, this way, I minimize the potential for getting food all over myself.”

El giggles as she sets down the plates, leaning over to give him a kiss, her mouth hot against his. Mike finds himself reaching for her, only one shirt sleeve rolled up, the other with the cuffs loose around his wrists, intending to pull her into his lap. But she slips away before he can get a good hold on her hips, grinning mischievously. “Hold that thought,” she says, voice almost husky, eyes sparkling as she stands up straight and brushes past him in a cloud of tulle and citrus.

“Where are you going?” he asks, turning to watch her disappear through the doorway he came through just a minute ago.

“Thought of something I wanted to show you,” El says, leaning backwards through the doorway to flash a smile in his direction, hair swaying beneath her head enticingly, before she disappears again. He hears her footsteps disappear up the stairs and he just sits there, listening for any sign of her movement through the ceiling above him. A few moments later, he hears her coming back downstairs and she pops back into view, arms laden with books.

“Whatcha got there?” Mike asks, smiling at the giddy look on El’s face.

“Photo albums, scrapbooks, and high school yearbooks,” El says. “A lot of stuff from high school and after I figure you might be interested in seeing.”

El plops down right next to him, twisting so she can put her armful of keepsakes down on the empty cushion on the other end of the couch. She’s all bouncy and bright as she turns to him, reaching for her wine glass as she does so. Mike can’t help but be drawn to her. El’s

magnetic and irresistible and he's caught in her web, never *ever* wanting to be freed.

Mike grabs his wine glass as well and he smiles as El clinks her glass against his. "Here's to the mother of all small-world coincidences," El says.

"I'll drink to that," Mike says with a laugh before they both take a sip from their glasses.

"We should eat before the food gets cold," El says.

"In a sec," Mike says as he reaches for El once more, gripping her chin lightly between his thumb and forefinger, the rest of his fingers curling against the underside of her chin. He hears the quiet gasp that escapes from between her parted lips and he just stares at her for a moment. He takes in the sight of her wide-eyed gaze, the cheeks that are flushed beneath the soft light of the lamps on either side of the couch, lips that look so soft and so fucking kissable he has to bite back a groan.

Mike kisses her then, because the idea of *not* kissing her is unbearable in a way that crawls beneath his skin, making him itch and *crave* to feel her lips pressed against his, to drown himself in *her*. El lets out a breathy moan when he captures her lips and he hears the clink of a wine glass being set down on the coffee table before she kisses him back. Mike manages to set his wine glass down, as well, and his now free hand settles on her waist while his other hand trails from her chin to the back of her neck. Mike startles a bit, shivering, when El's fingers slide into his hair, wrapping around the strands, and he kisses her just that much harder.

El tastes like the wine they just sipped and her skin is so soft beneath his touch, her body warm where she presses up against him, and Mike lets himself fall, just for a moment, into everything El has to offer, in the seductive promise of her mouth and hands. *He* manages to break the kiss this time, pulling away from her with a suddenness that has the both of them gasping. He opens his eyes, breathing hard as he looks at her. "Food, we need food," he says, breathless.

El pinches her lips together and lets out a whimper as she nods at

him. “Food is good,” she says, voice pitched high with need. She stares at him for a moment, all wide-eyed and wondrous, before she smiles. “You’re too pretty for your own good, did you know that?”

Mike chuckles even as he feels his face heat up. “Guys can’t be pretty, El,” he says, giving her a look down his nose.

El arches an eyebrow, pulling back a little more. “You really want to be telling the woman who’s going to let you see her naked what she can and can’t say? I gotta say, that’s a bold move.”

Amusement bubbles up inside of him, escaping from his mouth in a bright laugh, and Mike shakes his head at her. “Sorry, my mistake,” he says, biting the inside of his cheek to tame his smile. “How ever can I make it up to you?”

El looks up at the ceiling, an expression of deep thought on her face, before she gives him a teasing smile. “Hmm, when I figure it out, I’ll let you know.”

El reaches for her food and Mike does the same, noticing that El split the entrees between their plates so they each get some of each other’s food. “So, what did you want to show me first?” Mike asks, leaning a little to get a glimpse of the pile of pictures on the other side of El.

“Hmm, let’s see,” El says as she sets her plate in her lap and twists to rifle through what she brought from upstairs. She settles on the Hawkins High freshman yearbook to start with, laying the book open on the coffee table in front of them. “Do you wanna see Dustin wearing the most hilarious costume known to man when he was in the musical freshman year?”

Mike snickers. “Oh, *absolutely....*”

Time passes like this, El showing him things and Mike laughing at them, sharing his own stories in return. It doesn’t take them long to eat their dinner, but they linger on the couch, drinking wine as El flips through yearbooks and scrapbooks and photo albums.

El opens another bottle when they move on to the tiramisu that’s been sitting in her fridge, books cast aside as both of them go

through photos and text messages and social media accounts on their phones, showing each other the parts of their shared lives that happened when the other wasn't there to experience it.

And the entire time, they're laughing, amusement and incredulity in every moment, marveling at it all - at the near misses and the shared memories from two different perspectives and times and how the stories of their lives seem so much richer with each other's missing pieces to fill in the blanks.

It's a couple of hours since they both first sat down on the couch when Mike realizes something. They're halfway through the second bottle of wine, Mike leaning over El's shoulder as she scrolls through her Instagram account, when his eyes widen and he turns his head to look at her. "Oh my god, you're the reason for Dustin's strange foot fetish."

El's thumb freezes over the screen and she looks up at him, smiling so hard her eyes crinkle at the corners. "You mean the fetish he *sweats* isn't a fetish?"

Mike lets out a low chortle, not wanting to laugh too hard and upset the delicate balance of how El's leaning against him. He's leaning back against the couch, arm stretched across the top of the cushions, while El sits snuggled up against him, her legs folded up beneath her skirts. It's a perfect moment in an evening full of perfection. "Yeah, that's the one."

El giggles. "Yeah, I'm afraid I'm to blame for that. Ever since the first time he saw my feet when he was hanging out with Will at our house, he's been grossly fascinated with them."

Mike grins. "To be fair, your feet are, well...."

El arches an eyebrow. "Grotesque? Misformed? Gargoyle-esque?" she says, giggling throughout it all.

Mike can barely keep a handle on the smile that wants to stretch across his face. "Hey, you said it, not me," he says, reaching down with the hand that's on the back of the couch to find her feet beneath the layers of skirts cocooning them.

El lets out a gasp. “Don’t you dare tickle me, Mike Wheeler,” she says, inching away from him, playful warning radiating from her.

“What’ll happen if I do?” Mike asks, leaning over to stay close to her, his hand still searching for one of her feet.

“I’ll be very cross with you,” El says, pouting as she points at him, tapping her finger against his lips.

The expression is so adorable and does absolutely nothing to stop him. “Hmm, so I shouldn’t do *this* then, should I?” Mike asks as he finds one of her feet, finger running along the arch of it.

El lets out a squealing laugh. “Mike!” she shrieks, kicking out with her foot to get it away from his hand. Only Mike’s too fast and he circles his fingers around her ankle, spinning her on the couch so she’s facing him as he leans over her while they both explode with laughter. El pushes him to get him away from her ticklish skin, shoving so that he finds himself falling backwards. Overbalancing, Mike reaches out behind him with his other hand, bracing it against the arm of the couch to catch himself so he doesn’t topple to the floor.

They’re both still laughing as El crawls into his lap and wraps her arms around him, having dropped her phone to the couch so her hands can slide up his arms and shoulders to rest against his upper back, her palms warm through the fabric of his dress shirt where she’s touching him. Some of her hair has fallen in her face in all the commotion and Mike reaches up with a hand to push the strands from her face, his laughter calming as he stares up at her.

Mike’s heart begins beating rapidly in his chest as he looks at her, all happy and beautiful, lips stretched in a wide smile with an amused flush spreading across her cheeks. He watches the trail of his fingers as they move across her skin and tuck her hair behind her ears and he realizes that the mood has shifted drastically in the space between heartbeats. The laughter has come to an end as they stare at each other and Mike gulps, overwhelmed with everything that’s happening right in this moment.

El’s looking down at him like he’s everything she’s ever wanted,

happiness radiating from every inch of her, her smile softening as she stares at him. Her lips part just so, almost like she's amazed and overwhelmed at *him*. Emotion, fierce and powerful and all-encompassing, fills every inch of him, his heart swelling in his chest, like he's just going to explode with everything he's feeling. There's no way any one person can feel this much without coming apart at the seams, no way he can ever be expected to contain it all.

Mike's trembling a little now from the strength of his emotions and he reaches for her, grabbing a lock of El's hair so he can wrap it around his finger. Her hair is soft where it glides beneath the pad of his thumb and Mike marvels at it. It's perfect; *everything* about this, about *her* is absolutely *perfect*. And Mike's all too aware, now, of how they're sitting on the couch, her knees bracketing his hips, her arms around his neck, one of his hands clutching her waist as they stare at each other, and Mike never wants to move.

His gaze dances across her face as he tries to memorize everything, from the way she's looking at him, to the soft sounds of her breathing, to the feel of her warmth pressed up against him. "I can't believe that you're real, that you're here," Mike says, his voice just above a whisper, as if speaking any higher will break the spell that's wrapping around them with soft, seductive hands.

"I'm here, I'm *here*," El says, reaching for him in return, the fingertips of one hand pressing lightly against his cheekbone while her thumb caresses the skin just above his jaw.

"All this time, you were so close," Mike says, throat growing thick with the weight of it all. *14 years*. Half of his life. She's been so close for literally half of his life and he had no idea. And now that she's here, he never, *ever* wants to let her go.

"So were you," El says, eyes clouding over with tears. "But we're here now and we're not going anywhere. *Ever*." She looks just as overwhelmed as he feels and his heart pounds painfully in his chest at the realization that *he's not alone in this*.

Mike lets out a shaky sigh, the words that come tumbling out of his mouth he has no control over. "I don't know when it happened, but, somehow, I've fallen in love with you," he says, just barely breathing

the words. “And I don’t ever want to stop.”

El’s breath hitches in her chest and her lower lip trembles. “Then don’t,” she says, voice thick with emotion. “Because I’ve fallen in love with you, too.”

Mike lets out a laugh that is halfway to becoming a sob and he leans in, pressing his forehead against El’s, breathing her in, letting her presence surround and engulf him. “Oh, thank god,” he says as his eyes slip shut. He feels like he’s never going to catch his breath as it races after his beating heart, happiness exploding along every nerve, making him feel he can do *anything*. He’s never felt so buoyant, so jubilant in his entire life and it’s all because of the amazing woman sweetly curled up in his lap.

“Mike?”

El’s voice is quiet, breathy with need, and Mike opens his eyes to look at her. “Yeah, El?” he says, stunned almost speechless by the way she’s looking at him. Her eyes are wide, imploring, as her gaze dances across his face, flicking back and forth between his eyes and his lips. *So beautiful*, his brain whispers and he’s fascinated by the pretty blush that spreads across her cheeks, by how her tongue flashes out to lick at her lips, by how she’s breathing like she’s just as overwhelmed as he is.

“Kiss me. Please?”

God, Mike can’t deny her *anything*. And he never wants to. “Always,” he whispers. “Always and forever.” He looks at her one last time, committing the moment to memory, before he leans in. He feels her shift against him, meeting him halfway in a kiss that drags a sobbing whimper from *both* of them.

El wraps her arms tight around him as she kisses him, lips parting easily beneath his as their mouths gently slant against each other’s. Her lips are soft and warm, her tongue teasing, and El arches into him as Mike kisses her with everything he has, feeling her do the same as her fingers slide into his hair and her knees press hard against his hips, holding him close like she never wants to let him go.

It's a kiss that Mike feels all the way down to his toes, a kiss full of the promise of new beginnings and happily ever afters, of nights just like this, of waking up together, spending their days together - of sharing a home, a life, and their *hearts* with each other.

It's a kiss that makes him fall in love with her all over again. Mike knows, just *knows*, that he's going to spend the rest of his life falling in love with her over and over, falling deeper each time.

And he's never, *ever* going to be able to get enough.

Mike lets himself fall completely, lets himself get lost in El and the feel of her weight in his lap, in the sweetness of her mouth against his. There's nowhere he needs to be other than right here and it's *perfect*. El's lithe and soft where she's pressed up against him, and Mike can't help but moan as her hands trail down from his neck to caress his upper back and shoulders through his shirt. Her hands don't stay in any one place for long enough and it's like she's trying to make sure he's real, that he's really here with her.

It's a feeling Mike completely understands, a feeling he expresses in the way his arms wrap around her, one of his hands cupping the side of her head while the other trails up and down her spine. He just wants to hold her as close to him as possible and never let go.

They trade sweet, loving kisses for Mike doesn't know how long, both of them content to live in this moment forever. But, as it always happens with them, the world shifts beneath them, the kisses turning from soft and gentle into *more*, love feeding into the passion that always lingers just beneath the surface. And, suddenly, what was once a low, slow burn becomes a raging forest fire, mouths trying to devour each other's, the press of their bodies becoming maddeningly teasing instead of comforting.

Suddenly, they're not close enough and they both need *more*.

Mike shifts against her then, need coursing through him as he pushes up into her, and he takes the hand from her back down so he can trail his hand along her thigh, the softness of her skirts pressing against his palm. He lets his hand continue down the length of her leg until he hits bare skin, moaning at the soft smoothness he finds,

and he slides his fingers underneath the hem of her skirts, *needing* to touch her.

El tears her mouth from his as a soft cry escapes from between her parted lips. Mike takes a moment to look up at her, heart thumping madly at the sight of her swollen lips, cheeks flushed with desire as she looks at him with heavy-lidded eyes, head tipped back just so as she arches against him. A moan strangles in his throat and he ducks his head so he can press his lips along the column of her neck, the skin soft beneath his mouth, the scent of her perfume invading his nostrils with its light sweetness. He trails suckling kisses up and down the length of her neck, focusing on the places he knows drive her wild - the pulse point of her neck, the skin right beneath the corner of her jaw, the curve where her neck meets her shoulder - and El presses herself against him just that much harder, hips shifting and rolling with eager impatience.

Mike moans in earnest moments later when he feels El's hands move down to his chest so she can slowly unbutton his shirt, her fingers grazing against the bare skin she reveals inch by agonizing inch. His stomach swoops dangerously as desire pools beneath his skin and his only outlet is his mouth against her skin, the feel of her beneath his touch. Mike latches on to the skin just beneath the corner of her jaw, sucking hard as he moans at the caress of her fingers against his stomach.

El lets out a gasping moan in the shape of his name and her knees dig hard into his hips. "Zipper, back," she gets out, the words breathless when she speaks them into his ear, arching her back completely so that she's pressing against him from shoulder to hips.

Mike doesn't need more instruction than that. The hand cupping her head slides down until he finds the tab of the tiny zipper at the top of her dress. He pulls, tugging the zipper down, feeling it open silently as his hand travels down until he reaches the end just above the small of her back. He kisses her again and the skin of his stomach jumps as he feels El pull the tails of his shirt out from where they're tucked into his pants, her hands sliding in the open halves so she can press her palms against his bare skin.

They're both past the point of no return now. There's only *one* way

this can end and Mike trembles with excitement at the thought.

El curls her fingers around his ribcage and pushes back, forcing Mike to break away from where his lips are pressed against hers. “El?” he asks as she slides off his lap, standing in front of him so that he has to look up to keep his gaze on hers.

Mike watches her hands go to the straps of her dress and, suddenly, he can’t breathe as she slowly pushes them down her arms, baring herself to him one slow inch at a time. She slips her arms free and tugs at the fabric pooling around her waist so that her dress can fall to her feet.

Mike’s seen her naked (or near-naked, in this case) several times now, but each time it takes his breath away. El’s just *so beautiful*, stunningly gorgeous, miles and miles of soft skin and delectable curves. And she’s looking at him like she wants nothing more than for him to touch her and love her until she falls apart in his arms.

El reaches for him with both hands, chest heaving as she struggles to catch her breath. Mike’s breathing is just as labored as he takes her hands and he feels almost frozen in place under the intensity of the moment that surrounds them, the air thick with love and desire. El’s eyes lock with his, letting him see *everything* she feels for him, the want and the need and the sheer, overpowering love that makes him feel like he’s the luckiest man *ever*. “Take me to bed, Mike,” she all but whispers, tugging on his hands to pull him to his feet.

“Ok,” he breathes as he slowly gets to his feet, following her willingly as she pulls him up the stairs and to her bedroom, unable, *unwilling* to look away as she looks back at him over her shoulder, eyes filled with eager desire, the bare skin of her back tantalizingly shrouded by the silk waterfall of her hair. There’s no power on this earth that could make him look away or let go of her hand.

After all, she wants him to take her to bed.

How could he possibly say no?

El's heart beats so hard, it's not a guarantee that it isn't just going to burst from her chest as she guides Mike upstairs, his hand warm in hers. She can't stop looking at him over her shoulder, shivering under the intensity of his gaze, by how much he wants her and how much she wants him in return.

The upstairs of her home is dark except for the soft lighting coming from her bedroom and the warm light cocoons them as she turns to face him once she's pulled him into her room. She's so very underdressed compared to him, wearing only her underwear while he stands in front of her, fully clothed except for the dress shirt that hangs open to expose his bare chest.

But El's never felt more powerful in her entire life, more in control, as Mike looks down at her with eyes that are wide and enraptured, like there's nothing he wouldn't do for her. His hands reach for her, dropping to her bare waist to pull her closer to him, and El goes willingly, like there is no distance that is close enough.

El reaches for him in return and there's no need for words as her hands come up to slip inside the open halves of his shirt. His skin is warm beneath her touch and she slides her palms up and along his skin so she can push his shirt down and off his shoulders. El can feel the way Mike trembles beneath her touch as she guides his shirt down his arms, forcing him to relinquish his hold on her hips so the fabric can flutter down to the floor.

Mike grabs onto her again, but his hands don't stay still this time. His touch glides up and down her sides, making El shiver, and her hands go to the buckle of his belt, urgently needed to get him undressed so she can pull him over to her bed.

El can't stop trembling as she manages to remove him from his pants, leaving both of them in only their underwear, and Mike *moves*, leaning over her so he can kiss her. El meets him halfway, surging up against him, whimpering as their bare chests brush up against each other's. His hands are clutching her tightly now, one pressed hard on the skin between her shoulder blades, the other gripping her hip, pulling her flush against him.

But it's not close enough. It's *never* going to be close enough.

Moaning, El reaches up for him, arms wrapping around his neck so she can pull herself up, hooking first one leg and then the other around his hips so he has to wrap his arms tight around her to keep her from falling. She kisses him *hard*, mouth opening against his, trying to communicate with the simple language of her lips on his just how much she wants him, how much she *needs* him. It's like fire has been set to her blood and the only thing that can quench it is his mouth, his hands, his *body*.

Mike walks them over to her bed, pressing her into the mattress with delicious sweetness, and both of them moan as his weight fully settles over her.

His mouth leaves hers so he can blaze trails of hot kisses across her skin, leaving no inch of her neck, jaw, and collarbones untouched, unloved. His hands aren't still either where he's holding her, one hand moving up and down her bare thigh while the other caresses her waist. El squirms beneath him, need overpowering everything, and she can't help but gasp as his lips manage to press just so against the hollow between her collarbones. "Mike, *please*," she whimpers.

Mike lifts his head to look down at her and El swallows hard at the look in his eyes: pupils blown, gaze dark with need, love shining through it all. "Tell me, El," he whispers, leaning down so he can press his forehead against hers. "Tell me what you need."

"You," El all but sobs. "I just need *you*."

"You have me," Mike breathes against her skin.

He loves her, then, stripping her of the last of her clothing as he cherishes her, *worshipping* her with gentle hands and eager lips. El selfishly loses herself in the heat of his mouth, the curl of his fingers, the firm touch of his palms, as he drives her to the edge over and over again but never letting her fall, until she's a creature of pure want, everything driven out besides the need to shatter into a million pieces.

She pulls at him then, dragging him back up her body so she can look

up at him. He's looking down at her with flushed cheeks and swollen lips and eyes drowning in desire, the hint of a question creeping in along the edges of the expression on his face. El doesn't wait for him to ask, her hands trailing down his chest so she can slip her fingers beneath the waist of his boxer briefs. "Now, Mike. Now. Now."

Mike's eyes widen, but he nods, both of them scrambling a bit to remove the last layer separating them. And then he's laying so that his hips are nestled in the cradle of her thighs, one hand splayed along the curve of her hip and upper thigh, the other caressing her face while his arm keeps him propped up above her. "El, are you sure?" he asks, his voice a ragged whisper as he makes sure *one last time*.

El gasps, lower lip wobbling traitorously as her love for him sweeps through her entire body. "I'm sure," she manages to get out. "Just...." She trails off, gulping, as she reaches up for him, hands gently cradling his face. "Go slow? It's been a long time and I-" Her throat tightens with overwhelming emotion, cutting off the rest of her words as she trembles beneath him.

But the words aren't necessary because Mike nods with understanding. "It's been a long time for me, too," he whispers before he leans down to kiss her. "I love you," he says, pulling back just enough to whisper against her lips.

El almost sobs, eyes burning with unshed tears, every inch of her dangerously and completely overwhelmed. "Show me, *please*. Show me how much you love me."

"Always," Mike breathes before he kisses her again.

Slowly, so slowly, their bodies join as one and there's a moment - a weightless, *breathless* eternity of a moment - where all they can do is look at each other, unable to stop staring. El breathes out a near silent "oh" as everything clicks into place, their bodies trembling against each others, and El feels *complete*, like her whole life has been spent waiting for this very moment, to be joined mind, body, and soul with her one perfect person.

And El knows that *this is it* - Mike is the only person for her, now and

forever and she almost cries at the realization, love flooding her every thought, her every breath. “I love you,” she gasps, feeling too small to contain it, her emotions spilling out to drown her in their intensity, and a sob escapes her, breath hitching in her throat.

“Shh, it’s ok,” Mike breathes, the words spoken tremulously. “I’m here, I’m *here*. ”

Mike kisses her once more, but this time, he doesn’t stop as their bodies begin moving as one, love made tangible in every breath, in every caress. It’s the most amazing thing El’s ever felt in her entire life and her skin grows warm as love and desire spread through her veins like honey.

It doesn’t take long for need to build between them, fueled by everything they feel for each other, and El can’t pinpoint the exact moment it happens, but suddenly, the world shifts beneath her in a way that makes her dizzy. Their caresses become harder, kisses becoming hot and devouring, as love temporarily gives way to *passion*. They can’t stop touching each other, can’t stop moving against each other, all bruising lips and needy hands, the room filling with the sounds they can’t hold back, gasps and whimpers and moans that neither of them can control. And it’s so, *so* good - almost *too* good.

Need, sharp and insistent, builds inside of her and El loses herself in it, just as Mike loses himself in her. El lets herself fall, unable to stop it, shattering into a million pieces beneath the touch of his hands, the press of his body, the caress of his lips. His name tumbles from her lips in a sobbing cry as she falls and she feels like she’s *flying*, pulling Mike right along behind her as they tumble over the edge into pure sensation.

After, as they lay tangled up in each other, the sweet burn of spent pleasure floating in her veins, El can’t stop touching him, her hands roaming lightly over his arms and chest, needing to keep reassuring her that he’s *real*, that she didn’t just dream any of this.

Mike seems just as affected as she is, his touch grazing lightly across the skin of her back, fingers carding through her hair, as he looks at her, like he can’t believe he’s really here with her. “Hey,” he

breathes, smile pulling up his lips, sounding awed and incredulous.

El can't help the giggle that escapes her as happiness, powerful and overwhelming, bubbles up inside of her. "Hi," she returns.

Mike lets out a breathless laugh. "Would it be gauche to tell you how much I love you?"

It's official: El's never going to be able to stop smiling. "That depends, is it the sex talking? Or you?" She can feel it as the flirty teasing settles back between them and it makes her so happy that she can be with him like this.

Mike pretends to think about it for a moment, but he can't hold it for long. "Both, I think."

"Hmm, that's ok, then," El says, snuggling up against him. They're lying on their sides as they face each other and El drapes an arm across his waist, her leg coming up to hook over his hip, wanting to be as close to him as possible. "If it was just the sex talking, *then* we'd have a problem."

Mike brushes his fingers down her spine, hand pressing against the small of her back. "But, if the sex wasn't talking *at all*, I figure that would *also* be a problem."

"True," El says after a beat, nodding seriously. "So, I guess it's a good thing it's *both*, isn't it?"

"A *very* good thing," Mike says, leaning in to nuzzle his nose against hers in a soft, Eskimo kiss. "God, I love you."

"I love you, too," El says, tipping her face up so she press a soft kiss to his lips. "I can't believe I can finally say it out loud."

"Me neither," Mike says. "I've wanted to say it so many times over the past months, but it was never the right time."

"Hmm, I'm glad we waited until now, all things considered," El says, arching an eyebrow knowingly. "Especially with everything that came out tonight."

Mike lets out a laugh, the sound almost wild. “Oh my god, you know Will’s going to kill me, don’t you?”

El’s other eyebrow joins it’s arched twin. “Oh, do tell.”

Mike snorts with amusement. “I promised him I wouldn’t have sex with his sister. This is, of course, before I found out his sister is *you*.”

El just gives him a look. “Well, that’ll teach you to make promises sight unseen. Especially when his sister really, *really* wants to have sex with you,” she says, winking.

“Even though we already did it?” Mike teases.

“Especially because we already did it. There’s going to be a lot of sex, *all* the sex. So much that you might get sick of it.” El knows she’s grinning like an idiot, but she can’t stop, not when she’s this happy.

“Yeah, that’s never going to happen,” Mike says with a dramatic roll of his eyes. “Will’s just going to have to live with this if I can manage to avoid getting killed by him.”

“Hmm, I’ll protect you. I know all his dirty little secrets,” El says.

Mike chuckles. “My hero.”

El giggles before she sobers a bit. “Still, this raises a really good question,” she says.

Mike arches an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“How are we going to tell everyone? You know they’re going to flip.”

“And there’s nothing we can do to prevent that from happening,” Mike points out, the hand on her back trailing down so that it’s pressed low on her hip. He smiles at her suggestively, *excitedly*. “But, right now, there’s something more *pressing* that needs to be addressed.”

El gasps at the feel of his hand on her sensitive skin and she lets out a breathy whimper. “What is it?” she asks, playing along with the teasing tone in his voice.

"You see, *someone* mentioned 'all the sex' and I have yet to see evidence of this. I'm afraid I'm going to need proof so I don't get my hopes up," Mike says, smile turning into a shit-eating grin.

"Hmm, well, I would *hate* for you to be disappointed," El says, her breath starting to come to her in sharp pants, her skin flushing beneath his touch.

"So would I." Mike's hand moves, then, sliding down her leg and around to the inner curve of her thigh.

El gasps again, partly playful, but mostly aroused. "Michael Wheeler, are you trying to seduce me?"

Mike quirks his eyebrows at her, lips twisted in a dangerously rakish smirk. "That depends, is it working?" he asks, just above a whisper, as his hand continues to move up her inner thigh.

El giggles around a high-pitched moan, her fingers curling into the skin of his back. "Keep going and I'll let you know," she breathes, shifting against him as his hand continues to move up and up *until* -

"How about now?"

Need overwhelms her, burning away the playfulness of just a few moments ago. "God, just shut up and kiss me."

"Yes, ma'am."

It's the most incredible night of Mike's entire life. He makes love to El over and over again, unable to get enough of her. Mike's amazed his body can keep up, that he's able to respond to her touch, her *body* as often as he does. But he's not really surprised - he *wants*, wholly and completely, and he's never going to stop wanting her.

The short nap they take between rounds helps, though, as well as when they pop downstairs to finish off the tiramisu they only got halfway through, scrounging in her kitchen for another snack to

complement it, eating it as they stand in the middle of her kitchen, completely naked.

It's just past 3 when they *finally* fall asleep, sated beyond all reason, totally wrapped around each other, surrounded by soft sheets and the love they feel for each other.

Mike's never slept better and he's smiling when he wakes a little before 10. For a moment, he doesn't open his eyes as he savors the feel of El in his arms, her naked curves pressed against him in sleep. Satisfaction lives in every cell of his body as he curls up against her, spooning her tighter so that she's wholly pressed against him, her back to his front, his arm wrapped around her waist, the skin of her stomach soft beneath his palm.

But the need to *see* her becomes overwhelming and Mike opens his eyes, the soft light of morning streaming in through gauzy curtains, blanketing the room in a soft, dreamy haze. Mike's attention, however, is reserved solely for the woman in his arms and he pulls his elbow beneath him so he can prop himself up to look down at her. El's turned partially towards him, half on her back as she faces away from him, and, for a moment, Mike forgets what it means to breathe.

El's skin *glows* beneath the gentle light of day, blankets covering her up to her waist, which lets him see how her body looks in the daylight. She's iridescent, he *swears*, lit from within in a way that sun merely amplifies, all soft skin and perfect curves, just breathtakingly beautiful in every way possible.

The beginnings of desire start to stir again in his blood and Mike breathes out an incredulous laugh, amazed at how he wants her again so soon, after having her over and over again just hours before.

Food first, he thinks, knowing with startling clarity that their weekend is going to consist of nothing but *this* - him and her in her bed, showing each other how much they want each other, how much they *love* each other.

And, if that's going to happen, they need to be properly fueled.

So, after brushing a soft kiss against the curve of El's neck, grinning as she moans in her sleep, Mike slides out of bed. He dresses, barely, only fishing his discarded underwear from the floor and slipping it on before he quietly pads out of El's room and heads downstairs, an excited smile on his face.

He has a gorgeous woman to make breakfast for.

And he knows *exactly* what he wants to make.

El wakes alone, body missing the warmth of another's next to her.

She frowns, eyes blinking open, and turns to look behind her. Her arm stretches out, feeling the empty space where someone once was.

Not just someone, though.

Mike.

Brow furrowing, concerned confusion builds inside of her, mixing unfortunately with the deep and potent satisfaction that can only come from hours of incredible lovemaking.

Well, this is not how this morning is supposed to be going, El thinks as she sits up, blanket hugged loosely to her chest as she looks around her room. She spots Mike's clothes almost immediately, still pooled on the floor where they left them last night, and the concern fades away as she realizes he's still here.

But where?

And then she smells it - *breakfast.*

Suddenly, her frown disappears, confusion banished away as happiness infuses her once more.

Mike's cooking her breakfast.

El lets out a breathless giggle as she hurries out of bed. She grabs Mike's dress shirt from off the floor so she can slip it on, buttoning about half of the buttons, sighing as his scent surrounds her. She spares a second to check her hair in the mirror, running her fingers through it to try and loosen some of the waves. But to no avail - her hair is completely and thoroughly mussed.

This is absolutely what they call sex hair, El thinks with a giggle, warmth spreading through her chest as she remembers how Mike couldn't seem to stop himself from running his fingers through her hair whenever he had the chance.

Shaking her head to try and clear her thoughts, but completely unable to banish her smile, El moves away from the mirror and leaves her room, padding down the stairs barefoot, hand trailing lightly along the bannister.

El rounds the corner into the den, peering past it into her open kitchen where the delicious smells are coming from-

-and she stops, feet rooted to the ground, at the sight that welcomes her.

Mike's standing in the middle of her kitchen as he spoons what looks like scrambled eggs onto two plates before he turns to check something on the stove - *bacon*, if El had to guess from the smell. He moves confidently around the space, all but naked except for the black boxer briefs he's wearing, the sunlight that streams in through the windows bouncing off his bare skin, making him look like he's glowing as it emphasizes the lines of his body, and highlighting the wild cloud of his hair, locks curling just so at the ends. The look on his face is focused, intense, but edged with happiness.

It's the most beautiful sight El's ever seen and she would love it if she could wake up to this everyday for the rest of her life.

It's also incredibly and *irresistibly* sexy and El finds herself growing short of breath as desire begins to pool low in her belly, warming her and making her skin tingle.

I mean, what woman wouldn't want a mostly naked gorgeous man

cooking breakfast in her kitchen, I ask you?

Smiling, unable to believe just how goddamn lucky she is, El steps further into the den, needing to be closer to him. “Hey, there,” she calls out, giggling as Mike startles a bit. But the giggles fade when he looks at her, the look in his eyes full of awe and love and El wants to drown in the emotions the sight sparks in her.

And, just like that, El falls in love with him all over again.

Mike’s a little startled as he hears El’s voice calling out to him and he looks up from where he’s finishing up frying bacon. For a moment, he can’t breathe at the sight of her, wearing his dress shirt (and *only* his dress shirt, if the glimpses he gets of her body between the halves of the fabric aren’t lying to him), her hair spilling gloriously down her back and shoulders, gorgeously mussed. She moves towards him, hips swaying softly, bare feet whispering against the floor, and the smile on her face is both knowing and softly excited all at the same time.

Wow, his brain whispers as his heartbeat picks up the pace, stuttering a bit as it thumps hard in his chest.

And then he smiles as it hits him, all at once, that she’s smiling like that at him, *for* him and he finds his voice as his breath rushes back into his lungs. “Morning,” he says, clearing his throat a bit at how husky that sounded.

“Mmm, morning,” El says as she sidles up next to him, wrapping her arms around him with her front pressed against his side, and Mike finds himself unable to resist leaning over to kiss her, spatula in one hand where it’s poised over the pan in front of him. “What’s for breakfast?” El asks after she settles back down on her feet, stepping away to lean against the counter by the stove so Mike can turn off the burner before he overcooks the bacon.

Mike grins. “Well, bacon, for one - and I gotta tell you, I love a woman who has bacon in her fridge. I also just finished making

scrambled eggs. And then, to bring it all together.” He pauses, stepping back so he can open the oven, which is on its lowest temperature, to reveal the Belgian waffles he made. “I found your waffle iron. You didn’t have buttermilk, so I had to improvise with actual butter *and* milk, but I think it should be fine.”

El looks up at him and he’s struck temporarily immobile by the look in her eyes, all bright and happy and *incredulous*. “You made me waffles?” she says, voice soft, as a blinding smile crosses her face.

“I did,” Mike says, smiling back as he goes over to her, pinning her gently against the counter. He reaches for her with one hand, fingers tucking her hair behind her ear before he slides them into her hair on the side of her head, heart skipping a beat at the feel of the soft strands beneath his touch.

El giggles, the sound buoyant and magical. “Marry me,” she says, smile still affixed to her face.

For a moment, Mike’s heart stops. He knows she’s kidding - it’s a playful ask, teasingly happy - but he lets himself imagine, for just a second, what it would mean to be married to her and he so very badly wants the future that’s dangled tantalizingly in front of his face.

Only, when the time comes, *he*’s going to be the one to ask.

“I make you waffles and you’re already proposing marriage?” Mike asks, grinning. “What *will* everyone say?”

“That I landed quite the catch: a beautiful man who’s good in bed *and* makes me my favorite breakfast food,” El says, nose scrunching up adorably as she tries to hold back her laughter, biting her lip to contain her smile.

The sight of that lip bite is absolutely irresistible and Mike rushes forward, leaning over to capture that lip for himself, pulling her lower lip between *his* teeth as he kisses her. His hands go to her hips to pull her up against him and Mike feels El stretch up onto her toes so she can kiss him back, letting out a whimpering moan against his lips that sets him on fire.

But still, he worries about the strain of her reaching up to kiss him.

Luckily, though, there's a solution to this problem and Mike holds El's hips even tighter as he lifts her, boosting her up onto the counter. El helps, jumping up a bit so she can sit on the edge of the tile. Her knees part, letting him step between them as he kisses her even harder, their mouths opening against each other in an attempt to *devour* each other.

Mike's hands slowly slide down from El's hips to the tops of her thighs, her skin gloriously bare beneath his touch, before he sneaks his hands up under the hem of his dress shirt. His palms glide against the naked skin of her hips and Mike groans. He was right: she is only wearing his shirt and the realization has him gripping her hips tight, fingers curling around her almost bruisingly.

El whimpers and pulls away from the kiss with a sharp gasp. "Breakfast is going to get cold," she says, breathless with the desire that always overtakes them so easily.

"Hmm, would be a shame to ruin all my hard work," Mike says, grinning.

El mirrors the grin, giggling as her hands come up to rest lightly on his chest. "It's like you want me to make a horrible double entendre right now. You've set me up so nicely for it and everything."

Mike waggles his eyebrows. "I do live to serve."

El licks her lips, sucking in a sharp breath. "Hmm, I'll keep that in mind."

Mike pulls away so he can finish serving them breakfast, his body immediately missing her closeness. "Where's your silverware?" he asks, glancing at her.

El arches a teasing eyebrow. "You mean you *haven't* mapped out my entire kitchen yet?" she asks, grinning.

"Well, I'm sure I could figure it out," he says, giving her a look. "But this seems faster."

El spares him, pointing him in the right direction of first the silverware, then where the maple syrup lives once he serves the waffles. They eat breakfast in her kitchen, just like this: El perched on the counter, Mike standing between her parted knees, eating and feeding each other bites off their plates (even though they each have the exact same thing), trading sweet, salty kisses in between all of it.

Their plates are pretty much empty, but it's clear that El isn't ready to let go of any lingering hints of waffles on the plates. Mike watches as she drags her fingers across the surface of the plate, her tongue sticking out cutely from the corner of her mouth, gathering a bit of maple syrup and waffle crumbs on the top of her finger before bringing it to her mouth, sucking it clean.

Mike's mouth suddenly feels dry as he watches her do this, his heart stuttering to a stop as *want*, overpowering and all-encompassing, sets fire to his veins. He can't look away, gaze tracking her finger as she goes back for more.

Only, this time, El looks at him, finger halfway up to her mouth, and a knowing smirk crosses her lips as her eyes meet his. "Did you want some?" she asks, voice breathy and high pitched, and she holds her hand out to him, index finger daintily and temptingly pointed.

Mike doesn't speak, doesn't look away as he reaches for her hand, fingers encircling her wrist, and brings her hand closer so he can take her finger into his mouth. His tongue swirls around the digit, licking it clean of maple syrup, the rich sweetness exploding against his taste buds, and his breath catches in his throat when he hears her whimper. They haven't looked away from each other, gazes locked as the air between them heats up, and slowly, so very slowly, Mike releases El's finger so he can press a soft kiss to the inside of her wrist.

"What did you think?" El asks, chest heaving as she struggles to catch her breath.

"Sweet," Mike says, voice ragged with the desire that is threatening to overtake him entirely. "But not as sweet as you," he whispers before he rushes in again, capturing her lips in a kiss that sets them both on fire. El's legs immediately wrap around his waist, her heels

digging into the backs of his thighs as she holds him close, fingers dragging across the bare skin of his back.

Mike can't help the way he moans in response and his hands find their way to the buttons holding his shirt closed around her body, slipping them free easily. Once all the buttons are undone, Mike lets his hands slide inside the open halves of the shirt to touch her, palms mapping out the shape of her body, his touch eager and needy, every inch of him craving *more*.

He just needs her again.

Now.

El has the same thought, clearly, when she pulls away enough to look up at him and says, "Couch or bed?"

Mike groans at the sight of El looking up at him with lips swollen and glistening from their kisses, cheeks flushed, eyes dark with desire. "Counter's not an option?" he asks, ducking his head so he can capture the skin right above where her heartbeat pounds wildly in her neck.

El whimpers and tips her head back to give him easier access to the skin of her neck. "Hmm, kinky," she says with a breathy giggle. "Counter it is, then."

There's no more talking - not for a while, not as they lose themselves in each other, right there in her kitchen. And then again upstairs in her bed, fire racing through them so fiercely, Mike doesn't think he's ever going to be able to fully catch his breath as he lays next to her afterwards, sweat cooling rapidly on their bare skin.

"Holy shit, you weren't kidding," Mike says, brain still fuzzy, limbs tingling with spent pleasure that leaves him feeling a little dopey.

"About what?" El asks, sounding just as out of breath, a satisfied playing at the corners of her lips.

"About all the sex," Mike says, flashing her a grin as he rolls towards her to take her into his arms.

El arches an eyebrow. “Would I lie to you about that?” she asks, still smiling, though it’s rapidly morphing into a teasing grin.

“Not on purpose,” Mike says. “But there’s always a difference between expectation and reality, you know?”

“Hmm, I guess,” El says, leaning forward just enough so she can brush her nose against his. “But I can pretty much guarantee I’m always going to want you, so....”

Mike is fully aware that his smile is out of control, but he doesn’t care because he’s so goddamn happy. “Well, that’s convenient. Because I’m always going to want you, too.”

“Lucky me,” El says, pressing a soft kiss against his lips. “Hey, what do you say to a shower?” she asks. “We’re all sweaty.”

“As long as it’s *just* a shower,” Mike says. “I *do* need to recover, woman.”

El quirks an eyebrow at him, the hints of a smile dancing across her face. “Well, I *suppose* I can be magnanimous *this* time....”

The sound of their laughter follows them all the way into the bathroom, where they do only just shower, washing each other with soft giggles and gentle caresses. Mike just loves the feel of El’s skin beneath his palms, even in a mostly non-sexual context. She’s just so soft and so beautiful and he’s so goddamn lucky. This is to say nothing of how much he loves the feel of her touching him too, all warm and soothing, *comforting*.

God, he loves her so much and he can’t believe she loves him, too, can’t believe how lucky he is to have her in his life.

She was always going to be in your life, though, his brain reminds him as they dry off a few minutes later and it makes Mike remember that they still need to tell the rest of the Party about *this*.

(Well, maybe not *all* the dirty details, but... *something*.)

“Hey, when did you want to tell the others?” Mike asks as they stand in her bathroom, wrapped up in soft, fluffy towels, his around his

waist while hers is cinched tightly above her breasts.

El blinks a couple of times, caught off guard a little by the question, but she offers him a small smile a heartbeat later. “Well, the sooner we do we, the less shit they’ll give us down the line,” she says with a pointed tilt of her head.

“True,” Mike says, conceding her point. Seriously, he’s *never* going to get over the fact that she’s essentially been part of the Party for *14 years* and he’s *just* finding this out now.

Learn to live with it, his brain chides him and Mike shakes away the inner voice as he focuses back on El.

“So,” he says with a sigh. “How did we want to tell them?”

Will’s out at lunch with Lucas and Dustin when he gets the most perplexing text from Mike.

The three of them are eating burgers at one of their favorite lunch haunts and Will’s phone is sitting on the table next to him with the screen up, so Will’s able to see Mike’s name flash across his screen. Will puts down his burger and wipes his hands off with a paper napkin before he reaches for his phone, a grin on his lips.

“What’s up, Will?” Lucas asks.

“Text from Mike,” Will says. “Probably about his date last night.”

Only, it doesn’t seem to be about that at all.

Will unlocks his phone and goes to his text messages, frowning a little in confusion as he reads the text he just got from Mike: *what would you say if i told you i was dating your sister?*

It’s an odd, dumbass question, but Will’s not surprised - Mike texts him strange and leading questions all the time, usually as a way of testing ideas for whatever he’s writing, trying to find an authentic

response to make his writing even richer.

Which, is exactly what Will figures this has to be. *Hmm, maybe the date didn't go that well*, Will thinks as he texts Mike back: *i don't know, fuck you' i guess.*

"So, how was his date?" Dustin asks, grinning.

Will shrugs as he puts down his phone. "Didn't say. Just had one of his dumb scenario questions for me."

Lucas frowns. "That means he's writing right now," he says with a sigh. "Guess the date didn't go *that* well if he's by himself right now."

Dustin gives Lucas a look. "Hey, now, maybe he was a perfect gentleman and went home after he dropped her off. Not everyone jumps into bed after the first date, you know."

Lucas gives Dustin a look. "You mean like you did with Megan?"

Dustin blushes and Will laughs as his phone buzzes again, another message from Mike. *like, what would help break the news, then? to avoid a 'fuck you'.*

Lucas and Dustin start squabbling as Will tunes them out so he can type back a response, breathing out a bemused laugh. *well, exclamation points are always a plus, i guess. it's like a surprise. everyone likes surprises. it shows you care.*

oh, ok, is what Mike texts back.

Will thinks that's the end of it and he's halfway through turning his attention back to try and mediate whatever argument Lucas and Dustin have wound themselves up into. But his phone buzzes again in his hand, twice in rapid succession and Will looks down at the last two messages from Mike. *surprise! i'm dating your sister!*

And, right beneath it, is a picture that, for a second, Will doesn't understand.

It's a picture of Mike, sitting on what looks like a couch as he smiles for the camera. And, next to him, with her lips pressed to his cheek,

face turned at just the right angle to face the camera, is El, a smile pulling at the curve of her lips despite how they're pressed against Mike's cheek, her gaze sparkling with happiness just like his is. They're only visible from the shoulders up, but Will can see that Mike's not wearing a shirt and El's wearing what looks like a man's dress shirt. And he recognizes the couch as the one in El's family room.

Will stares at it. And stares at it. And stares at it some more, cogs slowly turning in his brain

He doesn't understand *at all* what he's seeing, has no context or reference or *anything* to help this make sense.

And then it hits him.

And Will Byers lets out a sound that can only be described as an agonized shriek before he *launches* his phone away from him, sending it sliding along the table.

Lucas and Dustin immediately go quiet as they look over at Will, but Will barely notices as everything he thought he knew crumbles to dust at his feet. "Oh my god, *oh my god!*"

Dustin reaches out for him, a hand gingerly pressing against Will's elbow. "Hey, Will, buddy, um, what's happening?"

Will turns to Dustin, frantic, while out of the corner of his eyes, he sees Lucas grab his phone. "What's *happening?*" Will repeats. "I have no idea! This doesn't make any sense! How did this happen?"

Lucas turns the screen so he can see it and Will looks over in time to see Lucas' jaw drop, the blood leaving his face. "Oh my god, *no way.*" He looks up at Will. "This is a joke, right? It *has* to be a joke."

Will claps a hand over his mouth as he remembers the last conversation he had with Mike and he feels like he's going to be sick to his stomach. "Oh god," he moans, nauseated. "I was giving him *sex advice last night.*"

The look on Lucas' face turns just as grossed out as Will feels. "Oh, eugh. God, no. You're joking, right? *Tell me you're joking.*"

“Ok, what in the *fuck* is going on?” Dustin all but yelps as he grabs the phone from Lucas’ hands. “What is so-” Dustin’s words die in his throat as he looks at the screen. “What.” The tone in Dustin’s voice is flat, and he looks up to look back and forth between Will and Lucas. “This isn’t real, right? Ok, haha, guys, very funny. Right?”

“I have no fucking clue what’s going on right now,” Will says, barely able to catch his breath.

“No, you see, Janie *can’t* be with Mike. Because he’s supposed to be with that hot teacher woman of his, ok?” Dustin says, sounding increasingly frantic and desperate. “And Janie *can’t* be a hot teacher woman. She just *can’t*. I won’t allow it.”

Holy shit, hot teacher woman, Will’s brain reminds him, hitting him like a sledgehammer and he slumps in his seat. “Holy shit, I don’t think this is a joke.” And Will doesn’t *at all* know what to make of that.

Dustin thrusts Will’s phone back at him. “Call him. Call him *right now*. We need - no, deserve answers.”

Something buzzes against Mike’s thigh and he yelps, the sound cutting off the moan that had been building in his throat.

Above him, El stills in his lap, her hands braced on his shoulders. “What? What is it?” she asks, her voice breathy and pitched high with pleasure.

Mike reaches for his phone, which is the source of the buzzing, pouting a little at having to remove his hand from where he was touching El to do so. He glances down at the screen and lets out a breathless little laugh. “It’s Will. You want me to answer it?”

El gives him a look that neatly slices through the desire wrapped around them. “You don’t *honestly* want to answer the phone to talk to my brother when we’re in the middle of having sex, do you?”

Really, he doesn't, but he can't resist teasing her about it.

After he sent that last text message to Will with the photo of El kissing his cheek, Mike had turned to her, both of them all giddy smiles and bright excitement. He'd kissed her right after and, well....

They got carried away.

Again.

"I mean, it would probably answer a lot of questions," Mike says, still grinning as he looks up at her, sparing a moment to glance down at her naked body, pressed against his equally naked one.

"Uh huh, yeah, no, I don't think so," El says as she takes his phone out of his hand and tosses it on the other end of the couch. Phone safely out of reach, El smiles down at him, her hands sliding up so she can weave her fingers into his hair. "Now, where were we?" she asks, her voice turning low and husky as she leans back in.

Mike places his hand back on her thigh. "I think we were right *here*," he says, voice dropping to a whisper as he kisses her. It doesn't take them long to pick up where they left off, the space around them filling with moans and gasps as they move against each other with roaming hands and fiery kisses, getting lost in the pleasure they offer to each other.

After, they take a moment just to sit together, foreheads pressed together as they struggle to catch their breath. "You wanna call him back?" El asks, voice soft and quiet.

"In a sec," Mike says. "I need to remember what my name is, first."

El giggles and presses feather-light kisses across his cheeks, her lips teasing and tickling. "God, I love you," she says between kisses.

Mike's soul *soars* at the quiet intimacy of the moment, heart filling with love to the point of bursting. "I love you, too," he says, a happy sigh carrying the words from his mouth.

El pulls back enough to look at him, but remains pressed close to him. "We should probably get dressed before we call him back, huh?"

Mike arches an eyebrow, amusement tugging at his lips. “Unless you really, *really* want to tell Will about our relationship when we’re like *this*,” he says, gesturing to where she’s still sitting in his lap, their bodies still intimately joined.

El lets out a giggling snort. “Alright, fair point.” She crawls out of his lap and they take a moment to get redressed...or as dressed as they were when Mike texted Will earlier.

They sit on the couch facing each other once Mike’s grabbed his phone and his finger sits poised to call Will back. “You ready?” he asks.

“Not really?” El says, a wry smile on her face. “But it’s like a bandaid, right? Just rip it off?”

“Sure hope so,” Mike says, mirroring her smile, before he pushes the call button, putting it on speaker in the middle of the first ring.

The phone picks up in the middle of the second ring and neither Mike *nor* El are able to get a word out before Will’s voice exclaims loudly from the other end of the line. “Dude, what the actual fuck!”

Mike snorts out a chuckle. “Hey man, FYI, you’re on speaker.”

“Hi Billy,” El says, lips twisting up in a teasing grin.

“Oh god, Janie,” Will says, whining. “You’re actually there, aren’t you? Holy shit, so this isn’t some weird trick with mirrors or some shit like that?”

“Nope, ‘fraid not, little brother,” El says, her eyes lifting to meet Mike’s gaze and he finds that he can’t stop smiling.

“Well, there goes that theory,” Dustin’s voice sounds out, sounding morose.

“I take it we’re on speaker, too?” Mike asks.

“What do you think?” Lucas says.

“And what the fuck took you so long to call me back? You can’t just

drop this megaton of a bomb in my lap and then *walk away*,” Will says.

Mike and El share a heavy look and Mike’s shoulders shake with silent laughter. “Do you really want me to answer that question? Be sure. *Really* sure.”

There’s a pregnant pause from the other end of the line before the rest of the guys collectively groan. “Oh gross,” Will moans. “Please don’t tell me the two of you were having sex.”

Mike shrugs. “Ok, I won’t tell you.”

“*Mike*,” El says, giving him a look, a coy smile teasing her lips.

Mike gives her a look right back, grinning. “*El*.”

“Oh ew, ew ew ew,” Dustin whines. “They were having sex. Brain bleach, where’s the brain bleach!”

“You figure it out, pass it the fuck over,” Lucas says.

“How did this happen?” Will asks.

“No, better question is *when* did this happen,” Lucas says.

Dustin scoffs. “*No*, what we *should* be asking is....”

El reaches down and presses the mute button as the rest of the Party starts squabbling on the other end of the phone. “Look, this is getting us nowhere. They’re freaking out like headless chickens.”

“Agreed. What did you have in mind?” Mike asks, seeing the spark of an idea in El’s eyes.

El smiles and the sight, like it always does, makes Mike’s heart skip a beat. “Just follow my lead,” she says before she unmutes the call. “Hey, assholes. You wanna stop squabbling like children for a second?” she calls out, interrupting crosstalk on the other end of the line.

There’s a long pause and Mike knows the guys are having a silent

conversation on the other end of the line because he can still hear breathing, just no words are being spoken. “Alright, talk,” Will says.

“Ok, I’m sure you guys have a lot of questions for us and I don’t think talking this out over the phone is going to calm your freak out any.”

“We’re not freaking out,” Lucas grumbles.

“Speak for yourself, dumbass,” Dustin says.

“What are you proposing?” Will asks.

“There’s a bar not far from your place that’s really chill,” El says. “Max and I have been there a few times since it’s pretty close to her work. And it’s a neutral place where we can talk this out. *Like adults, please.*”

Another long pause fills the air and Mike looks over at El, unbearably happy at just *all of this* - he’s amused at the reaction of his friends, amazed at listening to El talk with them like she knows them because she *does* know them, her conversation with them filled with the familiarity of a decade and a half of friendship. He doesn’t have to worry about how his girlfriend is going to fit in with his friends, because she’s already friends with them, and he’s so relieved, he hardly knows what to do with himself.

It doesn’t hurt that El is smiling back at him, eyes sparkling with amusement, cheeks lightly flushed, looking at him with a love so deep, it takes his breath away.

“Ok,” Will says after a bit, interrupting Mike’s reverie. “We’ll be there. Just tell us when and where.”

Will checks his watch as he sits next to Dustin and Lucas at a large, high top table in the bar El told them to meet her and Mike at. It’s just after 5, which is when El told them to be there, and he’s starting to get antsy.

“Ok, what the fuck is taking them so long?” Will grumbles, keeping one eye on the door and the other on the rest of the bar. El wasn’t lying; it’s a pretty chill bar, filled with wooden tables and low ceilings, patrons tucked into nooks like the one he and the others are sitting in.

“Maybe they’re just parking the car,” Lucas says with a sigh.

“Or maybe they’re sucking face somewhere,” Dustin says, grumbling.

Will shudders. “Can you *not*? I really don’t want to think about our best friend and my sister *kissing*.”

“Good luck with that,” Lucas says, pointing towards the door.

All three of them turn to see Mike and El standing in the entryway of the bar, bundled up against the cold, both of them dressed casually in jeans and sweaters beneath their coats.

Will, Dustin, and Lucas are all completely silent as they watch Mike and El together. Mike is looking around the bar, trying to find them, but El’s hand is on his forearm, tugging on him, pulling him towards her so that he’s facing her. Mike looks down at her as she says something to him, too far away for Will to hear, her face etched with nervous concern.

Mike smiles down at her, also nervous, but putting on a brave face, and his mouth moves as he speaks, replying to whatever El says. It must have been funny, because El’s face lights up and she laughs, shaking her head as she reaches for him. Her fingers wrap in the fabric of his coat and, as Will watches, El pulls Mike towards her, standing up on her toes as Mike leans down, their lips meeting in a soft, lingering kiss. Mike’s hands come up to hold her close, his palms tenderly cupping her cheeks.

It’s quite the sight given the height difference between them, Mike hovering over her as El curves up against him so they can kiss, but they make it work somehow. And, after the kiss ends, they stay pressed up against each other for a moment, foreheads touching, eyes closed. Mike’s lips move in a quiet murmur, El’s lips echoing the same shape. And that’s when Will knows.

Mike and El aren't just together (*and how, he still doesn't know*).

No, they *love* each other.

Somehow, they fell in love and no one else was there to see it happen.

"Oh god, they're so *schmoopy*," Dustin groans. "That's not right."

"Hopefully they won't be so disgusting around each other *all* the time," Lucas says, agreeing.

"God, at this point, I'm just hoping this doesn't blow up in everyone's face," Dustin says.

Will nods. "Yeah, hopefully," he says, but he's still staring at where Mike and El are still standing, neither of them having moved from where they're embracing.

And, though he's thoroughly disgusted with the thought of the two of them kissing and *doing other things*, Will has to admit that he's never seen either of them look quite so happy, so *content*. He also has to admit, even though it pains him, that there's something *right* about seeing the two of them like this, like two pieces that are supposed to fit together having finally found each other.

Well, if they make each other happy, I suppose I can try to be ok with it, Will thinks as Mike and El separate enough to walk further into the bar, hand in hand. El spots them first and points over at them, looking up at Mike with humor spread across her features, lips moving in some witty remark or the other.

Eventually.

Mike laughs and responds, his voice fading in as he gets closer. "...be so mean, you know," he finishes, giving Will no clue for what could have been at the front of that sentence.

"Hey, it's my prerogative, ok?" El quips back, grinning.

"What are you two talking about?" Will asks, interrupting.

“She’s making fun of you,” Mike says, jerking his thumb at her.

“You ass,” El says, but she’s smiling, so she’s not offended. “Why do I like you again?”

Mike grins as he and El climb up onto the two empty barstools and start taking off their jackets. “Is this really a conversation you want to have in front of our friends?”

El giggles and it hits Will just how *happy* she sounds. “Ok, I’ll just make you show me later,” she says, lips curling up in a coy grin, eyebrow quirking above a gaze that fills with suggestion.

“Damn straight, I will,” Mike says and it’s like both of them have forgotten that anyone else is at the table.

“Ok, *please* keep the overt flirting to a minimum,” Will says.

“Yes, my stomach will really appreciate that,” Dustin says.

“Sorry,” Mike and El say simultaneously, though it’s clear that *neither* of them is actually all that sorry.

Will rolls his eyes. “Ok, you promised us an explanation. So spill, what the fuck is going on? How, when, *why* did this all start?”

El smiles too sweetly. “Well, William, you see, when a man and a woman meet and they find each other attractive, they—”

Will reaches out and claps a hand over El’s mouth. “I beg of you, Janie, *do not* go all ‘Miracle of Life’ on me.”

“Hey, about we order a round of drinks before we tell you the story,” Mike says, trying on the role of peacekeeper, which is usually *Will’s* role to play. But Will’s too freaked out and confused to be peaceful about any of this. “Trust me, you guys are going to want to have some alcohol in your system.”

“A beer sounds fantastic,” El says. “I’m still having a hard time believing this myself, to be honest.”

“You and me both,” Mike says, smiling over at her, and Will can see

Mike moving his hand under the table so he can place it on her knee.

“Wait, what?” Lucas asks.

Mike and El exchange amused, disbelieving grins, before they look back over at the rest of them. “Long story short,” El says. “We had no idea who the other was until last night.”

“What do you mean?” Will asks. How could they not know who the other was? Haven’t they been working together since September and dating for the past month?

“She means I just found out last night that El, who I’ve been working with for the last 5 months, and Janie, who I’ve known about as your step-sister since we were 14, are the same person.”

“And I just found out that my Mike and *your* Mike are the same person,” El says before she looks over at Mike, eyebrow arched as she points a finger at him. “And, fair warning, if you start calling me ‘Janie’, this relationship is over.”

“Duly noted,” Mike says, grinning. “Wasn’t planning on it, but it’s good to know.”

Dustin lets out a whimpering noise that Will 100% feels with every fiber of his being. “Wait, I still don’t get it. *How could you not know?*”

“Hey, when I find out, I’ll let you know,” Mike says.

“You know, we might *never* find out,” El says, tilting her head towards Mike.

“Ok, I *definitely* need a drink. Or 5,” Lucas says.

“Ditto,” Will says.

“Hold on, let’s flag someone down,” Mike says, twisting to look around the bar to get the bartender’s attention.

“Ok,” Will says once everyone has a pint in front of them. “Start at the beginning.”

Mike looks over at El, a fond smile crossing his face; it's a smile that El returns, seemingly unable to stop it, and Will can't help the way the sight of the two of them smiling at each other warms his heart. "Well, it all started with a high school dance...."

It's crazy, hearing the story told out loud and El finds herself getting caught up in the tale Mike weaves for everyone. Oh sure, she interjects on a regular basis with clarifying statements and colorful commentary, but Mike's a master storyteller and she lets him take the reins of telling the rest of their friends about how this happened, enthralled by the way he tells the story of the two of them, of how they fell in love without knowing who the other *really* was and about how they found out.

There are a few rounds of beer shared between the table as Will, Dustin, and Lucas pepper her and Mike with questions, almost as confused and incredulous as she and Mike were last night about this strange twist of fate.

At some point, Dustin, Lucas, and Mike get into a semantic argument that El's really not paying much attention to (she's been too busy staring *at* Mike, getting lost in the way his eyes sparkle, in the gentle dusting of freckles across his nose and cheeks, in the curve of his lips as he smiles).

For a moment, El watches as Mike verbally spars with Dustin and Lucas and she can't get over watching him interact with her friends...who were *his* friends first. She can see the years of friendship that sit between them, in the familiar insults and the bickering, brotherly tones, and it makes her heart feel fuller than she ever thought possible that the man she loves and wants so spend the rest of her life with *already* thinks of her friends as his family. Because they *are* his family, just like they are for her.

There's a tap on her shoulder and El looks over at Will, who's giving her a wry smile, head tilting towards the bar. "Hey, I'm gonna go get another round started. Wanna help me?"

El smiles over at her brother. “Yeah, sure thing.”

Will and El make their way to the bar, leaving the other three bickering (though Mike spares her a curious glance, to which El just responds with a gentle smile). They put their order in with the bartender and, as they wait for their drinks, Will turns to her. “He makes you happy, doesn’t he?”

There’s no need to mention who “he” is and El smiles. “Yeah, he does. So much, Will.”

Will smiles and it’s a fond expression, though still a little shocked. “Well, you make him happy. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so happy in all the time I’ve known him.”

El’s throat feels too thick as she swallows against the tears that threaten to overtake her. “Yeah?” she asks.

Will nods. “Yeah. Mike, he’s...he can be moody, you know? Moody and prickly and intensely private. But since he’s met you, he’s like...the Mike he’s *supposed* to be. And you...I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so calm before. Seems like the two of you are really good for each other.” Will sighs and lets out a laugh. “You know, I’m starting to think the two of you would have always ended up together, no matter when you met.”

El laughs, heart feeling too full. “I think so, too,” she says. “I love him, Will. I know you probably don’t want to hear that, but I do.”

Will shrugs. “It’s ok, I get it.” He grins, nudging her with his shoulder. “Just as long as the two of you keep the PDA to a minimum, ok? There are some things I *really* don’t want to see, Janie.”

El arches an eyebrow at him. “I’ll try, but no promises.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Ugh, *figures*.”

It’s a while later before they all go their separate ways, promises made to get together for dinner sometime later in the week, saying their goodbyes with laughter and hugs and good-natured ribbing.

And then it's just Mike and El as they walk to his car, his arm slung over her shoulder as she snuggles up against his side. "Hey, you wanna go get something to eat?" he asks.

El looks up at him, smiling. "How about we get something to go and head to back to your place. Or my place, doesn't matter."

Mike grins. "Hmm, how about we pick up some food, swing by my place so I can grab a couple of things - maybe have sex in my bed just to see what it's like, if you're up for it - and then head back to your place for the night."

El very graciously ignores the blatant propositioning (*truth be told, she is up for it, but she's not going to tell him that. no, he has to earn it*) as she giggles. "So, you prefer my place to yours?"

Mike gives her a look that's both a little shy and amused at the same time. "Your bed is really comfy, ok?"

El laughs. "So all it takes is one night of the finer things in life for you to become addicted, huh?"

Mike stops them in the middle of the sidewalk and turns her so that she's facing him, a bright, teasing smile on his lips. "Ok, one, half the reason I'm addicted is because *you* were in the bed with me and, *two*, I don't think it's very nice to tease the man who, if I remember correctly, is responsible for the *multiple orgasms* you've had over the past 24 hours."

El giggles as she reaches up for him, hands clasping behind his neck. The air is cold, but his skin is warm and it helps ward off the chill that threatens to seep into her fingers. "You're right, I'm sorry. It was so mean of me to tease you. How ever can I make it up to you?"

Mike grins as he sucks in a sharp gasp. "Hmm, I can think of a few things," he says as he leans over her.

El finds herself pushing up onto her toes. "Oh, I'm sure you can," she says, voice lowering to a flirty whisper.

"Maybe I can even *show* you when we get to my place," Mike barely breathes out before he presses his lips against hers, his mouth soft as

it dances with hers, soft and teasing and *insistent*. El gasps into the kiss and opens her mouth beneath him, her tongue flicking out to brush against his. It's a knowing kiss, rich and lush, filled with promises of *forever*, sweet and enticing, and El knows it's one he'll keep as long as she makes and keeps the same promise to *him*.

When the kiss ends, both of them are short of breath, and El looks up at Mike to see him looking back at her with a world of emotion shining in his eyes, an intoxicating mix of love and want and happiness that El wants to drown in and never find her way out.

"I love you," she says, needing to tell him, needing him to *know*. She loves him more than life itself and she never, *ever* wants to stop.

Mike smiles, awed and breathless as he looks at her. "I love you, too." And El can hear it in his voice: he loves her *just* as much as she loves him.

How did she get so lucky?

Mike chuckles. "C'mon, let's go figure out dinner. *Someone* here has something they have to make up for. And I'm not naming names, or anything, but let's just say her name sounds an *awful lot* like a letter of the alphabet."

El laughs, because how can she not? Mike's just so adorable and cute and irresistible. He makes her smile just by being *him* and she's so in love with him, there's no way she ever wants to stop. "Alright, lead on, you nerd," she says, pulling him down so she can brush her nose against his before she steps back, taking his hand in hers.

Mike's smile turns toothy as he starts walking down the sidewalk once more. "So, I was thinking maybe Chinese for dinner. How does that sound?"

"Mmm," El says, eyes narrowing up at him. "I was hoping for something a little closer to Mexican."

"Ok, well, maybe we can split the difference and do Indian food. There's this really good place not too far from our neighborhood that you'll probably like...."

Mike and El spend the rest of the walk back to the car discussing what they want to have for dinner, the conversation domestic and calming, full of flirting and laughing and teasing the entire time, love throughout every moment.

They don't know it now (though they're beginning to suspect), but it's the beginning of new tradition, of a life shared wholly and completely, of nights in, of mornings together, of marriage and family and *forever*.

And, no matter what comes their way, they'll come to tackle it the only way they were ever meant to.

Together, Mike and El.

Always.

The End

Notes for the Chapter:

So, I hope that didn't disappoint! Again, thank you so much for reading. I love you all very, *very* much and I'm so blessed to be part of this fandom.

As for what's coming next? Well, I'd like to present my line up of oneshots that will becoming out in the following weeks:

1) "to have and to hold" - It's been a half an hour since Mike and El exchanged promises at the altar in front of their friends and family, and for the first time since becoming husband and wife, Mike and El get the chance to have a quiet moment alone. (part of "love's missing moments")

2) "give me your room and i'll give you my heart" - Mike Wheeler finds himself in dire need of a roommate, so he puts out an ad on the internet, looking for someone to help him cover his rent. Which is incredibly convenient because new-to-the city El Hopper finds herself in dire need of a place to

stay....

3) "be brave and kiss the girl" - El Hopper: beautiful, sweet, and instantly one of the most popular girls in the Hawkins' High junior class when she moves there after her dad takes the job of Police Chief for the small town. Mike Wheeler: king of the nerds, A/V club president, and completely invisible to girls.

Naturally, Mike notices the new girl - how can he not when she's the most beautiful girl he's ever seen in his entire short life? But she's so far out of his league, it's not even worth *dreaming* about. So it's completely and utterly confusing to him when El takes a lot more than a polite interest in him.

El, for her part, is instantly smitten with the cute nerd with gorgeous eyes, adorable freckles, and the most beautiful smile she's ever seen. No one understands when she decides to pursue him, especially not the popular kids, but it's harder than she bargained for to get Mike to trust her, to let her into his heart. Guess it's a good thing she's as persistent as she is popular, isn't it?